Work Hardcore

Reddit's r/elonmusk as Ideological Apparatus of the Silicon Valley Ethic

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This thesis looks at how the Reddit subforum of r/elonmusk relates to and potentially participates in the ideological promotion of work values associated with what is known as the Silicon Valley work ethic. The Silicon Valley work ethic is a set of dominating work practices originating from California's hub of technology startup companies and applied by billionaire-entrepreneur Elon Musk at his respective companies. Musk himself claims to work over 100 hours a week and to regularly sleep at his offices, while using this complete dedication to work to realize grand humanity-saving missions. Such practices are also expected of the employees at Musk's companies which include Tesla, SpaceX, and most recently the social media company Twitter. At focus in the thesis is to see how Reddit users on r/elonmusk – an online social media forum dedicated to Musk and his companies – discuss these intense and subjugating work practices and whether they come to support them in their overall argumentation on the issue.

The question is of ideological influence that Musk wields over his considerable following of geek-y online admirers who populate the forum. The work practices of the Silicon Valley ethic enforce structural hierarchies of domination by making workers accept unpaid overtime, long hours, and a lack of a clear work-life balance. Musk's promotion of these values in the media makes them more accepted and embraced as real-life practices in tech startups and companies. The primary research question of the study is whether r/elonmusk in its debate on the work practices at Musk's companies ends up operating as a further ideological apparatus in service of the ethic and thus socializing its visitors into embracing the ethic's values. The thesis also explores as a secondary issue as to whether the r/elonmusk forum acts as an online echo chamber for admirers of Musk that insulates itself away from any critique or negative sentiment posted on the forum about Musk.

In the study, I focus on three r/elonmusk posts made about an internal memo sent by Musk to employees of Twitter where Musk demands his new employees to work "extremely hardcore" as well as "long hours at high intensity" in a summation of Silicon Valley work principles. These posts and their most prominent arguments are approached with a framework of materialist ideology-theory which spans scholars from Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Projekt Ideologie-Theorie and its acolytes to Stuart Hall. Critical tools of this materialist tradition will allow us to see how both Musk and Reddit as material ideological actors with capitalist profit-motives are able to shape the discussions had on r/elonmusk. I argue that social media and ideology should be approached in media studies in general through this materialist framework and its method of critical intervention into ideological phenomena. This argument is in opposition to debate had recently on ideology as a critical tool in the journal *Media, Culture & Society* as well as the idealist formulations of Christian Fuchs.

Through the analysis of the argumentation and discussion practices present on r/elonmusk, I argue that the forum does act as an ideological apparatus for the Silicon Valley work ethic. I argue that the forum acts as a site of common sense processing for Musk's geek-y followers, who are also ideologically interpellated by Reddit's dominant culture of white masculinity and geek-y interests. There is also criticism of the Silicon Valley ethic on the forum and in this openness to critique the forum can not be argued to have an encoded ideological message about the ethic. In its admiration of Musk, however, the forum shows signs of echo chamberization in moderating away personal criticism of Musk and by being influenced in its overall discussion culture by Musk's joke-y online persona.

Key words: Reddit, Elon Musk, r/elonmusk, Silicon Valley work ethic, materialist ideology-theory, online echo chamber, Stuart Hall, Projekt Ideologie-Theorie, social media, ideology

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1 Introduction

1.1 Musk and Reddit – A Brief Exchange of Ideological Influence

Going forward, to build a breakthrough Twitter 2.0 and succeed in an increasingly competitive world, we will need to be extremely hardcore. This will mean working long hours at high intensity. Only exceptional performance will constitute a passing grade.

–Elon Musk, in a memo to Twitter employees (November 16, 2022)

I would work for him if I was 20, had no girlfriend, or kids, and was looking for a motivating challenge. To maybe retire at 30. Musk is hardcore […]

–Reddit user on r/elonmusk, an online forum dedicated to Musk (November 18, 2022)

In the above quoted internal memo, billionaire-entrepreneur Elon Musk presents an ultimatum to his new employees at social media company Twitter – either work "long hours at high intensity" or leave the company. Demands to be "extremely hardcore" and for workers to put in long hours have been recurring practice at Musk's renowned technology companies SpaceX and Tesla for many years now (*CNBC* 2020, *Business Insider* 2022a). With the publicization of the Twitter memo, however, Musk – who himself claims to work around 100 hours per week and to spend his nights sleeping at the office (*CNBC* 2018a, *BBC* 2022) – gained a new level of notoriety for his preferred working culture.

The latter quote comes from the social media website Reddit, one of the most popular online platforms in the world which hosts over 50 million active users every day and which consists of over 2 million subcommunities and specialized forums (*The Verge* 2020; Carlson & Cousineau 2020, 203). Musk, who has a passionate online following which has in news stories been described as "cult-like" (*Vox* 2017, *The Verge* 2018), has a forum dedicated to discussing the events in his life and the daily operations of his companies on Reddit named r/elonmusk.

A Reddit user visiting the forum responds in the quoted text whether they would accept the ultimatum Musk proposes to Twitter employees and whether they would submit to "long hours at high intensity" (*CNBC* 2022a). The user says they would work for Musk if 1) they were young, 2) had no pressing social relations or obligations, 3) were looking for a motivating challenge in work, and 4) in order to retire wealthy at a young age. In a moment of appreciation and even idolation of

Musk, the user goes on to directly adopt Musk's line of being "hardcore" (see Reddit 2023a) in one's work life.

As I see it, the relation between the two quoted texts is a case of ideological influence that Musk has wielded. The exchange shows in near real-time the Reddit user accepting practices and values related to working life that Musk – as a thriving capitalist and industrialist, *par excellence* – has applied to his own great benefit. The user is in effect accepting a working situation that is marked by a considerable degree of domination, in the form of a demand to dedicate one's life to one's job over most all other meaningful pursuits and spheres of life. In wanting to work for Musk, the user is readily accepting that the job at Twitter or one of Musk's other companies would be the prime and perhaps the only source of personal value in their life.

The user's reaction gets at the heart of the present study – why would the user in question accept an arrangement like the one Musk proposes? Why would they go as far as welcoming and embracing a working relation that is so stringent in its practice and so evidently marked by a relation of domination?

1.2   Research Questions and Central Premises of Study

The answer to these questions has to do with ideology, which is the main topic of this study in relation to work practices promoted by Musk. More specifically, the study at hand looks at the online response to Musk's Twitter memo and the work culture it promotes, as the memo is discussed on the aforementioned Reddit forum r/elonmusk.

In the analysis, I will focus on three posts made on r/elonmusk that deal with the release of the memo and its aftermath that led to a large percentage of Twitter employees to resign (see *The New York Times* 2022a). The three posts were the largest in terms of comments made about the memo and its related news stories on the forum. In their scope, the posts can be seen as the most telling examples of the forum's overall disposition towards and potential ideological acceptance of Musk's work practices.

Musk's preferred work culture is characterized in academic literature as being shaped by a "Silicon Valley work ethic" (see Crandall et al. 2021, 847). The moniker refers to the region of Silicon Valley in Northern California, which for decades has acted as the hub of the U.S. technology industry and where many of Musk's business ventures too have originally based themselves in.

The Silicon Valley work ethic is particularly prevalent in the area's numerous startup companies, that is, small and newly-founded companies, often operating in the tech industry, which are marked by a high potential for growth through outside investment and financing (see Hyrkäs 2016, 21–22). The ethic's key set of practices include 1) working for a grand and motivating mission that has implications of saving and benefitting humanity at-large (Crandall et al. 2021, 844; see Mannevuo 2015, 115), 2) working long and intense days where some of the time spent at work can often go unpaid (Mannevuo 2015, 129–130), 3) a great degree of flexibility that elides lines between personal and professional lives (Benner 2002, 38; Crandall et al. 2021, 847), 4) working in small dedicated teams with an ostensibly flat structure of management (Hyrkäs 2016, 122–123; Mannevuo 2015, 121), and 5) the promise of a big payout once a startup company becomes successful and fulfills the prospect of some, as in the case of the previously quoted Reddit user, to "retire at 30" (see Ross 2004, 10; Aran 2018, 1239).

These are some of the values Musk refers to when he demands his workers to be "hardcore" in their daily approach to work. Such practices are routinely applied by Musk in his companies even as they have grown beyond the confines of startup culture and become globally successful in their respective fields.

I argue as a fundamental premise of this study that the Silicon Valley ethic can be characterized as an ideological set of practices and values. To put it another way, the practices are applied in tech companies and startups to uphold hierarchical structures of domination (see Rehmann 2013, 242–243; Kyyrönen 2020, 111) – in the present case, the structures exist between Musk and his employees, that is, between the capitalist and the given workers on their payroll.

Ideology is a term that one hears used in a host of everyday situations: Often the word can be used as a way of describing a set of ideas that oversimplify and distort a person's understanding of things (Eagleton 1991, 3–4). The word can also be used to refer to the political perspective or system of beliefs of a given group or community, such as a political party or some kind of specialized advocacy group (Corner 2001, 525; Corner 2016, 266).

In the account of materialist ideology-theory, the principal theoretical framework of this study, ideology is seen rather as a set of *real-life practices* that are present in various material entities. Ideology is thus a material phenomenon where multiple actors, apparatuses, institutions, and ideologues participate in the upholding of structures of domination that have a material existence. (Rehmann 2013, 4–5.) The concept is thus not reducible to all different political leanings nor is it

something that operates only on the level of the mind, confusing and distracting individuals away from seeing reality.

Reddit as an online platform and social media company can be considered to belong to this constellation of material ideological actors. Ideology-theory has often seen media institutions as participating in the production of consent and subjection of the masses to ideological practices, particularly practices involved in contemporary labor relations (Althusser 2001, 143). Reddit is a profit-seeking media company (Reddit 2023b) with an interest in upholding the economic status quo of neoliberal capitalism that is currently dominant throughout the Global North.[1]

Reddit – which in its prevailing discussion culture has been characterized through values of white and "geek-y"[2] masculinity (Massanari 2019, 20; see Lanius 2019, 416–417) – has moreover been found in academic literature to be a kind of safe haven for politics based on domination and discrimination. The platform has been host for communities engaging in forms of misogynist activism online, racist and hateful rhetoric against Black people and other people of color, and communities which have generally stoked and engendered politics of the American far-right (see Massanari 2017, Carlson & Cousineau 2020, Rieger et al. 2021).

Musk too – as a very successful capitalist and at one time the wealthiest person in the world (*CNBC* 2021a) – can be seen as an ideologue working to uphold relations of domination in the materialist sense. Musk's most direct ideological practice is the application of the discussed work practices in his companies, but Musk is also very active in promoting the Silicon Valley way of working in the media. Be it in interviews (*CNBC* 2018a, *The Observer* 2022), on his personal social media (Musk 2020a, Musk 2022a), or in biographical accounts (see Vance 2015), Musk is actively working to win more widespread acknowledgement and acceptance for his preferred work practices. In this activity, too, he participates in the material ensemble of actors and apparatuses that work to support and maintain ideological forms of domination.

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[1] Neoliberalism as a concept is most often used to describe economic policies that ensure a market-order that is ostensibly free from interference by governments. Key neoliberal objectives also include attempts to dismantle the structures of the welfare-state and to weaken the overall bargaining power of workers and labor unions. These goals are reached for in the name of the individual and their freedom as well as the entrepreneurial spirit that permeates the notion of the free market. (Rehmann 2013, 272; see Harvey 2005, 3.)

[2] Adrienne L. Massanari (2017, 331) describes this geek-y emphasis of Reddit as coalescing around topics of "technology, science, popular culture (particularly of the science fiction, fantasy, and comic book variety), and gaming." Massanari (ibid. 332) argues further that these values are often closely intertwined with gendered expressions of white masculinity.

What I strive to do in this thesis is to see whether r/elonmusk as an online media space participates in the spreading and valorization of the Silicon Valley ethic as another material ideological actor in the discussed constellation. The discussions had on the forum are necessarily shaped by both Reddit and Musk's influence as ideological actors. In analyzing the forum's response to Musk's memo to Twitter employees, the present analysis tries to see whether that influence and the overall content of the forum discussions can be said to cohere into a distinct promotion and further spreading of the ethic or not.

On this basis, the primary research question of the study can be expressed as:

- RQ1: Does the r/elonmusk forum function as an ideological apparatus[3] for the Silicon Valley ethic?

This is the driving question as the study looks at how the r/elonmusk forum discusses and debates Musk's memo and the application of the Silicon Valley work ethic at Twitter's offices. Put another way: do the r/elonmusk discussions and the lines of argumentation put forth in them end up promoting the ethic on the whole to whomever comes across the discussions online? This key question will be approached in this thesis with the help of a materialist ideology-theoretical framework of analysis.

In answering this primary question, the analysis will also emphatically take into account any and all criticism aimed at Musk and the ethic on the forum, that is, user comments that speak against the ideological forms of domination associated with Musk's companies and their work practices. The r/elonmusk forum is generally open to anyone interested in discussing Musk, which may include both segments of Musk's considerable online following as well as those more critical of Musk and his public persona. The analysis at hand tries to account for the forum's disposition towards the Silicon Valley ethic as a whole – an objective which demands consideration of all potential contradictions and disagreements that also present themselves in the analyzed discussions.

The potential for critical voices on the forum sets up the second driving research question of the study, that is:

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[3] In line with materialist ideology-theory, I take apparatus here to refer to institutions, places, and agents which participate in organizing ideological subjection (Rehmann 1983, 72; Koivisto & Bollinger 2009, 301; see also Haug 1987, 63). In the context of media studies, however, the concept has been primarily used to investigate relations between ideology and the technology involved in media production (see Baudry & Williams 1974).

- RQ2: Does the r/elonmusk forum function as an echo chamber for followers and admirers of Musk?

The notion of an echo chamber is widely debated in studies of social media and ideology (see De Francisci Morales et al. 2021). An echo chamber has been commonly defined as a community of people whose shared beliefs are amplified and continuously reinforced through repetition – i.e. an echoing effect. At the same time, these communities tend to insulate themselves from outside critique by sealing themselves inside a "closed system" of some kind, giving the term its other principal quality of functioning like an enclosed chamber where the echoed opinions can not be intervened into by contradictory ones. (Morini et al. 2021; see Kopytowska 2020.)

Through being exposed to only one-sided arguments (Wojcieszak & Mutz 2009, 42), such communities encourage like-mindedness amongst their members with "little or no critical scrutiny" (KhosraviNik 2017, 64).[4] A further definition sees echo chambers as online spaces of "loosely connected clusters of users with similar ideologies or interests" (Zimmer et al. 2019, 41) where members only engage in sharing information that is deemed appropriate to common interests.

Reddit and its breadth of subcommunities have provided many examples of ideological case studies of online echo chambers (see Morini et al. 2021, De Francisci Morales et al. 2021, Zimmer et al. 2019, Guest 2020), though ideology as a concept is treated in these studies in the more narrow definition of political leaning, particularly in the context of U.S. national politics. Reddit's tendency to give rise to echo chambers has been publicized enough that the platform's founders have had to actively speak against the phenomenon and its effects in the media (*BBC* 2017, *The New York Times* 2020).

The present study will strive to add to the understanding of how echo chamberization may function on Reddit, while at the same time seeing how r/elonmusk relates to Musk's much discussed "cult-like" online following. To what extent does the forum allow discordant and critical voices with regard to Musk and his preferred work ethic? Does the forum insulate itself away from these voices, or are they able to participate in the discussions in the same way as users who would count themselves as admirers of Musk? The goal is to offer a fuller picture of the prevailing discussion practices on the forum and to see how these practices contribute to the forum's overall ideological functioning with regard to the Silicon Valley ethic.

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[4] In this formation of like-minded groups, echo chambers are often seen as overlapping with the notion of "filter bubbles" emerging in online spaces (see KhosraviNik 2017, 63; Kopytowska 2020).

The study of the forum's ideological functioning is all the more pressing due to how Musk's profile has risen in recent years and how Musk's power with regard to media has grown with his purchase of Twitter in late 2022. Musk – who himself has an immense audience of 136 million followers on Twitter, the most of any Twitter user (*The Verge* 2023a) – has now more clout and ability to disseminate his preferred work practices than previously in his career. The internal Twitter memo that leaked in November 2022 was perhaps the most widely publicized instance of broadcasting Musk's work practices to a wider, global audience. This publicity in the news media, in turn, creates discussion online where awareness and acceptance of the practices is potentially spread further and further.[5]

The analysis is also driven by the increasingly potent ability of both Reddit and Musk to call on swathes of geek-y, often white male audiences in an ideological sense. As someone belonging to this particular demographic, I remember seeing the growing admiration of Musk in the media and on Reddit in the latter part of the 2010s and being able to understand why some would find Musk an inspiring figure. Musk is hailed by his followers as a visionary and genius who wants to save the world and expand humanity to other planets in the process, namely by establishing a colony on Mars (see *The Verge* 2018, *The Washington Post* 2022a). These kinds of missions guiding Musk's work and career are on some level admirable and easy to find riveting in their science fiction-like enthusiasm for the world and for their unapologetically geek-y foundations.

The recognition of Musk's call for scientific exploration and wonder was then followed by seeing reports of bad treatment of employees in Musk's companies (see *The Guardian* 2017, *Vox* 2019) and Musk's own claims of working 100 hours a week in order to realize his dreams, a standard he expects from his employees too (*Bloomberg* 2018). The understanding of how Musk could amass a dedicated online following turned into wondering why said following did not have their admiration of Musk more disturbed by the incoming reports of working conditions in Musk's companies.

I take here as my analytical starting point that the Silicon Valley way of working and its related practices are based on forms of ideological domination and should be questioned and reimagined if possible (see Rehmann 2013, 145–146). If the values related to the Silicon Valley ethic are

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[5] Moreover, startup culture and its related work values have been steadily spreading outside of Silicon Valley's immediate geographical constraints over the past decades, alongside Musk's personal promotion of the values. Marko Ampuja (2021) has written how the value of innovation – key to motivating employees in tech startups – has been adopted as a guiding principle in a host of state-level agencies and policies in Finland. Henri Koskinen (2022) has studied startup culture as a discursive phenomenon in Finland that has shaped predominant meanings attached to entrepreneurship in an information-based economy. Nationally-based startup cultures have also found themselves discussed in books on the local entrepreneurial scenes of the United Kingdom, France, Israel, and Japan, to name but a few (see Whittaker 2009, Senor & Singer 2009, Heller et al. 2019).

promoted and spread on r/elonmusk, as the analysis at hand tries to see, this online discourse too should be intervened in and redirected towards values less marked by forms of acute domination.

Through critical ideology-theoretical means and in promotion of anti-neoliberal and egalitarian values, I take part in the wider ideological struggle about the Silicon Valley ethic and its related work practices that is localized here on the forum. From an academic position and point of view, I analyze and attempt to constructively rearticulate any found support for the ethic on the forum while encouraging and providing further supportive arguments for those who are seen to be critical of Musk's work practices and values. This striving for intervention into the active ideological struggle that is taking place on r/elonmusk about real-life work practices lays out the foundational methodological approach of the analysis to come.

1.3 Overview of Chapters

The thesis is divided into four major chapters of discussion. In the first of these chapters, I will contextualize the three overlapping objects of study further by discussing Reddit, Musk, and r/elonmusk as distinct actors in the contemporary media landscape. Each of these media actors is given their own brief section of discussion in order to better tie together the analysis to come about the forum discussions had on r/elonmusk about the Silicon Valley ethic. This contextualization will also allow me to set the ideology-theoretical framework of the study and outline the analytical corpus of r/elonmusk posts with more clarity in regard to what is being studied – this latter outlining will be done at the end of the chapter.

With the help of this contextualization, I will in the following chapter move on to argue the ideology-theoretical framework further as the most suitable basis for the study at hand. I will problematize the studying of ideology on Reddit and social media altogether through debate had within media studies around the legacy of Stuart Hall and the difference between materialist and idealist conceptions of ideology. From there, I deepen the materialist framework applied by introducing formulations made by Projekt Ideologie-Theorie and by arguing both Musk and Reddit as belonging to their notion of the ideological powers. These materialist formulations have considerable impact on how to best approach r/elonmusk as its own distinct ideological apparatus.

Chapter 3 continues with a more in-depth discussion of the Silicon Valley ethic and its key qualities. I extend my argument for the necessity of a materialist framework by arguing the ethic as an ideological set of work practices and values. I do so by discussing the history of the work ethic

as a general exploitative concept and by analyzing the embeddedness of dominating work practices and economic structures in Silicon Valley's famous startup culture.

Having argued my theoretical position and the need to study the Silicon Valley ethic as materialist practice, I move on to analyze the r/elonmusk discussions and their argumentation about the ethic in chapter 4. In the chapter, I focus on the most prominent positive arguments made in favor of Musk's implementation of the Silicon Valley ethic at Twitter. The arguments and discussion practices present in these debates will be investigated with the further help of materialist ideological concepts and critical tools that I elucidate along the course of the analysis. Each section of analysis in the chapter is dedicated to one argument and its ensuing debate on the forum, with the three most prominent positive arguments being 1) *Twitter Staff Is Lazy and Spoiled*, 2) *Musk's Work Culture Has Worked Before*, and 3) *Tech Work Requires Flexibility and Dedication*.

Along the course of the analysis, I continuously weigh my findings against the two research questions set here – that is, whether r/elonmusk functions as an ideological apparatus of the Silicon Valley ethic and whether the forum acts as an echo chamber for online followers of Musk. This analytical reflection continues in chapter 5 where I move on to study the prominent negative arguments made on the forum about Musk's enforced transition in work culture at Twitter. With these analyses, I strive to see how the forum can host criticism of both Musk and the ethic and, in doing so, see how the users' criticism affects the forum's overall ideological standing. The negative arguments that are used to structure the discussion in this chapter are 1) *Transition of Twitter's Work Culture Is Too Chaotic*, 2) *Musk Has No Vision for Twitter or Appealing Mission for Its Employees*, and 3) *Work Environment in Musk's Companies Is Toxic*.

A concluding chapter will gather the findings and make a final determination about the forum's ideological functioning with regard to the Silicon Valley ethic and potential status as an online echo chamber in its admiration of Musk. The conclusion will also sketch out further directions in which develop the analysis of all three central ideological actors in the study as well as the Silicon Valley work ethic as a distinct ideological form of domination.

2   Principal Actors and Methodological Foundation

In this chapter, I will contextualize the key material actors of the study – i.e. Reddit, Musk, and r/elonmusk –in order to better illustrate what exactly is being studied in this thesis and also how I intend to approach the delineated research questions with regard to r/elonmusk. I begin the discussion by looking at Reddit's basic structures and functions as an online space. These basic functions will help us to understood how ideological values have come to be expressed on Reddit before and how they may be expressed on r/elonmusk with regard to the Silicon Valley ethic.

From there, I move on to discuss how the Silicon Valley ethic has been present throughout Musk's personal life and as applied practice in his multiple technology companies. I also briefly analyze Musk's notorious media presence and how Musk's amassing of a considerable online following elevates him to the status of a prominent capitalist ideologue in service of work values based on domination.

Based on these two sections, I go on to argue that the Reddit forum of r/elonmusk is in fact the most concrete expression of Musk's noted online following. All of these discussions will help us to more clearly delineate the online corpus that will be analyzed later – that is, the r/elonmusk posts and comments made about the Silicon Valley ethic – as well as the principal methodological approach of this study, i.e. the critical framework materialist ideology-theory. A brief discussion of these latter two issues – the corpus and the methodological framework – will close out the chapter.

2.1   Reddit as a Platform – Ideological Values and Discussion Structure

Reddit's ability to form ideological forums and communities has so far been mostly studied with regard to explicitly political forums. The most studied case of an ideological echo chamber on Reddit is most likely the alt-right forum r/The_Donald, which came to be a prominent online space for supporters of Donald Trump's presidential campaign in the U.S. in 2016.[6] Reddit users have, however, been found to also cohere around ideological values on forums intended for more purely

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[6] The majority of studies involving r/the_Donald and Reddit's ability to form ideological echo chambers have been large-scale computational data analyses. In this thesis, I argue for the need to approach Reddit and its potential echo chambers from a more expressly critical and qualitative point of view. For discussion of r/the_Donald and its relation to the notions of ideology and echo chamberization, see Roozenbek & Palau 2017, Zimmer et al. 2019, Carlson & Cousineau 2020, Guest 2020, De Francisci Morales et al. 2021, Morini et al. 2021, Rieger et al. 2021.

entertaining content, as in a notable case around issues dealing with the gaming industry and its related online actors (see Massanari 2017).

To understand how Reddit and its users can come to support ideological values in a less immediate way and through entertainment content like this, there needs to be an understanding of the basic functions of discussion that the platform is built around. Understanding how Reddit as a platform is structured will allow us to see more clearly how ideological values are engaged with on r/elonmusk with regard to Musk and the Silicon Valley ethic. These basic functions of discussion on the platform will be the primary focus of this section.

The initial hurdle is defining what Reddit – originally established in 2005 – actually is as a website and platform: In academic studies, Reddit has been described as a social news site (Suran & Kilgo 2017, 1036), a social news aggregation site (De Francisci Morales et al. 2021), and a user-contributed, aggregated media site (Carlson & Cousineau 2020, 203). Others have described Reddit as a social networking site akin to Facebook and Twitter, while others have considered the site to be the "largest online discussion forum in the world today" (Medvedev et al. 2020; see Suran & Kilgo 2017, 1036).

I argue that Reddit would be best described as a social media platform like Twitter and Facebook that is, however, built more like an open social forum in structure than a social network like the other two services (see Morini et al. 2021; Suran & Kilgo 2017, 1036). The focus on Reddit is on sharing and discussing content related to a variety of topics, including the news, politics, entertainment, popular culture, as well as personal stories and relationships (Massanari 2017, 334). This content is the "aggregated media" spoken of in the discussed definitions. The content – which could be in the form of text, image, video, and links to other websites (Carlson & Cousineau 2020, 203) – is shared and discussed on various subforums dedicated to a given topic, making Reddit itself the platform that merely collects the ensemble of these social forums and their discussions.

The sharing of content can, however, also encourage community connection (Massanari 2017, 334) through the specialized subforums where users can find others with similar interests and values, much like on the more traditional social networking sites. The difference to other social network sites like Facebook and Twitter is that connections on Reddit happen pseudoanonomously (Lanius 2019, 416), that is, users do not by-and-large interact on the forums using their real names.[7] Instead,

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[7] As a measure of further anonymization and safeguarding of individuals' privacy, users whose comments on r/elonmusk are analyzed in this study will not be referred to by their usernames either. Comments will instead be given

Reddit users – also known colloquially as "redditors," a neologism of the words "Reddit" and "editor" (Singer et al. 2014) – have a chosen username that they use as they participate in discussions across a variety of different Reddit forums.

The notion of users as "editors" speaks to the power that Reddit users have to shape the forums themselves as well as their own personal experience of the platform. Indeed, any registered user can create a new subforum on Reddit. Users can set the topic and the rules of their forum, known also as a "subreddit," while sometimes also assuming position of moderator on the forum in question. (Singer et al. 2014.) Moderators uphold the rules of a subreddit and have the ability to remove content as well as ban users from the community for which they are responsible (Tchach et al. 2022, 5). All subreddits are thus built on user initiative and user-generated content (see Suran & Kilgo 2017, 1035), with little interference from Reddit's platform-wide administrative team (Weninger et al. 2013).

While users are active in creating communities, the platform's structure also encourages them to belong to multiple different communities at once. All Reddit users can choose which subreddits they want to subscribe to. Subscribing to a subreddit means that content from that particular forum will be automatically directed to a user's personalized homepage and news feed. (De Francisci Morales et al. 2021.) Each user thus customizes their own experience of Reddit by choosing what type of content they want to see and potentially contribute to further.

Characterizations of Reddit as a news aggregation site rang perhaps more true when the platform still identified itself in promotional materials as "the frontpage of the Internet" (see Morini et al. 2021). A user's homepage would gather the most popular content across multiple subreddits and display those that are being talked about the most and deemed most interesting by the platform at-large – the user's personalized feed thus acted in some sense like the frontpage of a newspaper.

Reddit is still a major platform for discussing news online, but the website's wide variety of subforums and content is more accurately described in terms of its new slogan as of July 2021 – "Dive into anything" (Reddit 2023d). With over 2 million subreddits and communities (Carlson & Cousineau 2020, 203), the available offering of content on Reddit is immensely diverse and at times very particular.

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reference codes to help the overall analysis of the forum discussions at hand. For further discussion of the privacy concerns involved in analyzing online media materials, see Thompson et al. 2021.

Adrienne L. Massanari (2017, 331) has noted a proliferation of geek interests among Reddit's most popular subforums. Among the top 50 most subscribed subreddits, one can find the following forums:

- *r/gaming* (#4 in the top 50)
- *r/science* (#6)
- *r/askscience* (#18)
- *r/space* (#30)
- *r/gadgets* (#31)
- *r/Futurology* (#41)
- *r/dataisbeautiful* (#46)
- *r/technology* (#50)

The list of most subscribed subreddits also includes considerable representation of entertainment and popular culture (e.g. r/movies, r/Music, r/books, r/sports, and r/television), discussion of world events (r/worldnews, r/news), as well as more personal stories and viewpoints (r/AskReddit, r/Showerthoughts, r/LifeProTips, r/tifu). (Redditlist 2023.)

Reddit has also come to be known as an integral part of shaping online humor and of disseminating memes and jokes to other sites and social media (Zannettou et al. 2018; see *Vox* 2022). In the top 50 subreddits, there are forums that are expressly intended for joke-y and humorous content – namely, r/funny and r/Jokes – but the sharing of memes can also be seen as a sitewide form of "cultural currency" (Massanari 2019, 20) that regularly takes place in multiple different communities.[8]

Reddit users keep subreddits vital by posting content in them, be it in the form of text, images, links, or other materials. These posts, in turn, are reacted to and discussed by other users posting their personal comments about the post's subject matter. Comments can be commented on by yet other users, resulting in a tree structure that covers the overall discussion had in a single post:

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8 Aside from the top forums, there are numerous other recurring themes in Reddit's selection of subforums – these include country-specific forums (e.g. r/Suomi and r/Sweden), food forums, animal and nature forums, relationship forums, political forums, pornographic forums, etc. Subreddits can be increasingly obscure and niche in their specific focus. Massanari (2017, 331) has suggested that if, for instance, one wants to discuss a mostly unknown and esoteric Japanese TV show, it is likely that a subreddit will already exist for that show – and if not, "one can easily be created."

Discussion tree
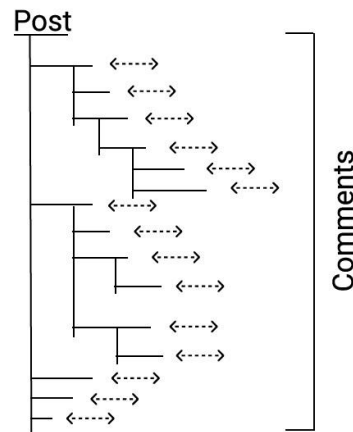
Figure 1 Tree structure of average
Reddit discussions (Medvedev et al.
2020).

As exemplified by the quoted tree structure, discussions on a Reddit post can sometimes extend into great lengths as multiple comments are posted and reacted to, which are again reacted to by other users, and so on. This type of extending dialogue among Reddit users is called a thread (Suran & Kilgo 2017, 1037). Threads are usually anchored to initial top-level comments that are in direct reaction to the topic of the post at hand (Weninger et al. 2013). These comments are represented in the tree structure by the first horizontal line extending from the post's upright axis.

A comment rises to become a top comment through Reddit's system of upvoting and downvoting. Each comment comes with a score through which other users show their approval or disapproval of the comment in question (De Francisci Morales et al. 2021). Users can either give a comment an "upvote," meaning a user supports the point of view or content of a given comment, or they can "downvote" the comment, meaning they disagree or dislike the other user's contribution. A comment's score is the totality of its upvotes and downvotes.

This score, in turn, dictates whether a comment rises the ranks of the post's tree structure and comes to be seen more by other users. Most upvoted comments are often presented as the very first comment of a post, a status which often leads to further reactions in terms of new comments and votes given to a comment (see Weninger et al. 2013).

Each Reddit post is also given a score through upvotes and downvotes which determine the post's overall popularity and visibility (Massanari 2017, 337).[9] Posts with many upvotes are promoted in users' personalized feeds more than posts with only few approving votes. In this function, the voting system acts as an attempt to democratize the content shared on Reddit (see Weninger et al. 2013), recalling the platform's original slogan of being the "frontpage of the Internet," that is, a collection of the most popular and talked about content.

Users' ability to determine the best and most seen content speaks to what Tim Weninger, Xihao Avi Zhu, and Jiawei Han see as setting forums like Reddit apart from traditional media platforms. Sites like Reddit "increasingly set the news agenda, cultural trends, and popular narrative of the day" (Weninger et al. 2013), whereas previously the same agenda-setting power was wielded by a handful of news organizations and mass media actors. Reddit, in turn, can "harness the power of the masses" (ibid.) in order to curate, rank, and provide commentary on the day's most pressing news and talked about cultural topics.

Weninger et al.'s view aligns with the relative consensus in media studies that social media is marked by increased audience participation in the production of media content, when compared to more traditional forms of mass communication. Social media platforms, in their reliance on user-generated content, act in this view as meeting places for the simultaneous consumption and production of all sorts of media content (see Zajc 2013, 3–5; Zajc 2015, 62–63).[10]

Weninger et al. note that Reddit is distinguished from its social media peers of Twitter and Facebook in its ability to present clearly hierarchical discussions through its tree structure. This clear structures allows for "divergent sub-topics resulting in a more robust overall discussion" (Weninger et al. 2013).

Facebook has since introduced hierarchical commenting to its platform, but Weninger et al.'s argument has resonance in capturing the characteristic vastness and unruliness that defines Reddit as a platform. Reddit – as the 9th most visited website in the U.S. and 20th most visited site globally, as of April 2023 (Similar Web 2023) – has millions of active users who belong to a diverse collection of different subreddits and forums. A Reddit user does not necessarily have to

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[9] Posts and comments that get heavily downvoted are often hidden and thus less seen by other users.

[10] Jose van Dijck (2009, 45–46) has suggested that the participating user's role in digital media is more nuanced and multifaceted than this and features a range of user types from "'creators' to 'spectators' and 'inactives.'" This distinction does not, however, dispute the overall increase in levels of audience participation on social media platforms, in comparison to more established forms of mass communication and media.

subscribe to a subreddit in order to post or comment on one. The vast majority of subreddits are open to all users, and it is this openness of movement within Reddit which makes it all the more difficult to treat subreddits as clearly defined communities consisting of a specific set of users.[11]

Individual subreddits can likewise be vast and diverse in their content. Each subreddit comes with its own culture of discussion (Medvedev et al. 2020), which can include very distinct mixes of memes and jokes, links, news stories, as well as more personalized content. On the r/elonmusk forum, users can find others, for instance, discussing their personal thoughts about Musk and the impact that Musk has had on their lives. Users are actively sharing news stories and memes about Musk, linking to his most recent tweets, and discussing their view of Musk's personal politics.[12] Depending on the subreddit, a given forum on Reddit may be mixing elements of entertainment, politics, and personal content in the confines of one dedicated online community.

This same approach of mixing content and register can hold true for expressly political forums too, as in the case of r/The_Donald which was found to be one of the most effective disseminators of memes online altogether (see Zannettou et al. 2018). Even though first and foremost a community cohering around the political values of Donald Trump's presidential campaign, the discussions had on the subreddit about these values would be laced into material that might be more so seen as simply online entertainment content on the surface.

A reverse mixing of registers can be seen in Massanari's (2017, 334–335) example of a gaming-related subreddit, r/KotakuInAction, which in 2014 became a hotbed of misogynist online activity tied to a harassment campaign known as GamerGate. GamerGate activists targeted women working in the video game industry as developers and critics with online rape and death threats, while also publicizing personal information of their chosen victims (*The Washington Post* 2014). The titular Kotaku of the forum is a video game website hosting reviews and seen by the Reddit activists as promoting feminist and social justice values which the activists oppose (Massanari 2017, 335). The r/KotakuInAction forum is thus an example of a subreddit that is ostensibly focused on discussing popular culture and entertainment, but that also carries with it expressly ideological values of oppressing and dominating women in the gaming industry.

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[11] Some elements of community can be discerned, for instance, by looking at a given subreddit's general rules and guidelines. These and other potential elements of community will be discussed in relation to r/elonmusk and its ideological functioning as the analysis continues.

[12] Some of the most popular ways of tagging a post's subject matter on r/elonmusk include "Tweets," "Meme," "Elon," "General," "Art," "Parody," "SpaceX," and "Tesla" (Reddit 2023c).

Reddit can thus appear as vast both in terms of the selection of subreddits and the diversity of content in a single subreddit. The same diversity, however, exists also on the level of an individual post and its ensuing discussion. As argued by Weninger et al. (2013), the hierarchical and intricate nature of Reddit's tree structure can lead to increasingly "robust" discussion on the platfrom. There can be debate and multiple contradictory points of view expressed in the many nodes of a single Reddit thread, particularly on subreddits that do not require a subscription for users to participate. This potential for lengthy debate in individual posts can render subreddits more nuanced and harder to pinpoint in their particular value sets, especially if the forum in question is not as clearly organized around specific values as forums like r/The_Donald and r/KotakuInAction.

The latter point is why studying the ideological functioning of r/elonmusk is so urgent. The forum is not an expressly political subforum and not tied to a clear ideological movement. The guiding hypothesis of this study, however, is that such a forum could still participate in the dissemination of values that are thoroughly ideological in nature, as in the case of the Silicon Valley work ethic and its principal values. The forum's relation to these ideological values has to be understood through looking at its particular discussion culture and its recurring discussion practices.

It could be argued that r/elonmusk's veneer of not being driven by clear values makes it perhaps more potent and more insidious in its potential function of disseminating ideologies than a distinct and echo chamberized political forum. The spreading of values on a forum like r/elonmusk can be harder to detect and intervene in – equally for both a scholar and most any Reddit user – as the forum engages in characteristic mixing of registers and content as well as the potential for overflowing debate in its multiple different comment threads.

Focusing on r/elonmusk as an object of ideological analysis is moreover apt because of Reddit's platform-wide dominant culture of white geek masculinity (Massanari 2019, 20; see Lanius 2019, 416–417). In the limited available analyses of Reddit's demographics, the platform would seem to skew somewhat towards "male, white, English-speaking users" (Roozenbek & Palau 2017, 197). Taken together with the discussed geek-y interests that populate the platform and that are in their value sets often coded through white masculinity (Massanari 2017, 332), the overlapping demographic of white male geeks can be seen as the principal segment of users that Reddit is courting and actively appealing to as a discussion space and profit-driven media actor. Musk – with his ardent followers interested in the operations of his technology companies – can for his part also be seen as a beacon of online geek culture (see Davydovska 2021, 18).

On Reddit, the dominance of white geek masculinity is made all the more stronger by the forum's pseudoanonymous culture of discussion: Taken together, the effect of these two traits can be seen as a purported neutrality and democracy in Reddit's overall content, a characterization that the platform leaned into with its "frontpage of the Internet" slogan. In other words, Reddit as a platform can make claim that its most seen content is dictated by a fair and democratic process of voting for the most entertaining content, while this process of voting is actually determined to a large degree by an anonymous and overrepresented segment of white and geek-y men. The r/elonmusk forum, as a contributing party to Reddit's dominant culture of discussion, acts as an illuminating example of how a forum marked by geek interests can potentially carry and spread ideological values through its seemingly innocuous content and discussion culture.

In sum, the presence of ideological values on Reddit can be determined by and obscured under multiple factors. Through what has been discussed in this section, I recognize the following factors as requiring consideration:

1) *Lack of clear community as users traverse the platform and subscribe to multiple different forums,*
2) *Potential onslaught of mixed registers and types of content posted to a given subreddit,*
3) *Potential for diverse debate and discussion in a single post through the platform's tree structure,*
4) *Ability of users to freely form and moderate their own subreddits and communities,*
5) *Ability of users to choose which comments and posts are most visible and which are not through the platform's voting system, thus setting the agenda and narrative for discussions about a given topic,*
6) *Dominant and neutrality-seeking culture of white male geekness.*

An ideological analysis of a Reddit forum needs to take into account the compounded effect of these potential factors. Having to hold all of these factors in mind means that any ideological analysis of the platform has to be very considered and attentive in its approach when determining the functioning and potential values of a given subreddit.

2.2   Elon Musk as Ideologue of the Silicon Valley Ethic

If there was a way that I could not eat, so I could work more, I would not eat.

–Elon Musk (cited in Vance 2015, 48)

The above quote is a proclamation that a friend of Elon Musk's recalls hearing during a private phone conversation with a then-young Musk. Said in private but publicized in the only authorized biography of Musk so far (see Vance 2015), the quote speaks to how central the Silicon Valley way of dedicating one's life to work is to both Musk's self-conception as well as his publicly promoted persona of a hardworking tech magnate.

This section looks at the place that the Silicon Valley work ethic occupies in Musk's life, both as a managerial practice in his companies as well as a part of Musk's media presence and politics. Musk is arguably the most prominent spokesperson of the ethic today, the full extent of which is necessary to understand as the present thesis goes on to argue Musk as an ideological actor in service of particular work values based on domination. This status as an ideological actor is what motivates the primary focus of the study, that is, to see how successful Musk's calls about the Silicon Valley ethic have been among the Reddit users discussing Musk on the r/elonmusk forum.

Musk's current status as a capitalist ideologue[13] goes back in salient ways to his social and class origins in 1970s South Africa. Born to a South African father and a Canadian mother in 1971, Musk's family was markedly wealthy while Musk was growing up in the city of Pretoria, South Africa. Musk's father owned a successful engineering business (Vance 2015, 34) and purchased an active emerald mine operating in the country of Zambia in the mid-1980s (*The Independent* 2022).

Musk's father has characterized the level of wealth the family attained due to purchasing the mine in a later interview: "We were very wealthy. We had so much money at times we couldn't even close our safe" (ibid.). Decisively, the family could support a 10-year-old Musk's rising interest in computers and the relatively nascent field of modern computer science by buying young Musk a personal computer, the Commodore VIC-20 (Vance 2015, 38), thus laying the foundation for Musk's later career in the technology industry.

Through family connections, Musk was able to move to North America in the late 1980s to work and study. In 1995, he relocated to Silicon Valley with his brother in order to enter the tech industry through a startup idea of establishing a Yellow Pages-like, online directory for businesses. The company, Zip2, was initially financed with a $28,000 funding from Musk's father; the company

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[13] Ideologue as an advocate and prominent spokesperson for a given ideology is at times used interchangeably with the notion of an ideologist. I side here with the preference of Projekt Ideologie-Theorie and its proponents who use the former category in their analyses of material ideological actors (see Rehmann 2013, 249). Both designations extend to the inception of ideology as a concept in general in late 18th century and early 19th century France (ibid. 15–19).

was eventually sold in 1999 in a transaction that netted Musk $22 million. (Vance 2015, 45–47, 60–62, 72.)

Musk invested over half of his money into another startup idea that would eventually come to be restructured and known as the online banking service PayPal (ibid. 80). In 2002, the service was acquired for $1,5 billion dollars – Musk as the largest shareholder received a personal share of approximately $180 million from the purchase (*Time* 2021a). This money, in turn, was used to fund the operation of two of Musk's most well-known companies – the still active technology companies Tesla, an electric vehicle manufacturer, and SpaceX, a spacecraft manufacturer and aerospace company (Vance 2015, 116, 154).

Both Tesla and SpaceX are built around grand, humanity-saving missions, a cornerstone motivating technique of the Silicon Valley ethic (see Crandall et al. 2021, 843). For SpaceX, Musk's mission is to establish a colony on Mars and to make humans into a "spacefaring civilization" (SpaceX 2023; see *The Independent* 2021). For Tesla, the principal goal is to reduce the effects of climate change through technology relying on renewable energy and to save Earth in doing so (*Forbes* 2022; see Tesla 2023).

It is likely that Musk, now 51, originally assumed the Silicon Valley work ethic as he moved to the tech industry hub to establish the startup company Zip2 with his brother. It was during this time that Musk began his practice of sleeping at the office and reportedly working more or less around the clock (Vance 2015, 62). At turns, Musk would also live together with his employees (ibid. 62), a marker of the importance of small dedicated teams and demands of flexibility in one's personal life that the Silicon Valley startup culture is known for (Crandall et al. 2021, 859; Hyrkäs 2016, 105). Such work practices and conditions are often accepted by workers in the tech industry in the hopes that their given startup idea will eventually lead to the kind of payout Musk received for Zip2 later (see Crandall et al. 2021, 847–848; Aran 2018, 1262).

These kinds of practices – e.g. sleeping at the office, housing with other employees in small teams at the expense of one's personal life – have been expected in Musk's current companies Tesla and SpaceX too (Vance 2015, 136, 234, 255; see *Bloomberg* 2018, *Fortune* 2022). In Vance's biographical account, a Tesla employee recalls receiving new orders from Musk to have the employees reduce costs and change their shifts in order to stick to an announced production schedule for a new car model:

> He gave a speech, saying we would work on Saturdays and Sundays and sleep under desks until
> it got done. Someone pushed back from the table and argued that everyone had been working so

> hard just to get the car done, and they were ready for a break and to see their families. Elon said,
> 'I would tell those people they will get to see their families a lot when we go bankrupt.' (Vance
> 2015, 176.)

The directions given to the Tesla employees show that even as Musk's companies have expanded and escaped the confines of being small Silicon Valley startups, Musk has chosen to retain the work practices he assumed in his earlier years. Tech startups adopt many of these practices due to a lack of funding and pressure to succeed (see Koskinen 2022, 44), but in the case of Musk's thriving later ventures like Tesla and SpaceX, the question to apply such practices becomes one of managerial choice and preferred capitalist work culture.

It would seem that Musk, having experienced the pressures of Silicon Valley's tech industry, has since deemed the work practices of many tech startups to be applicable and useful at most every scale of production. The Silicon Valley ethic will keep workers motivated as they find themselves part of achieving a grand and meaningful mission as well as through the promise of being paid well if a company becomes successful enough and is sold. These motivating factors will have workers in the industry accepting working conditions that are increasingly stringent, in order to help the company keep costs down and in that way help with the realization of the guiding mission at hand – the mission now seen as belonging to both company and the worker themselves.

I argue here that Musk's family wealth and resources, along with his direct lineage of engineering and capitalist venture through his father's businesses, were instrumental in leading Musk towards his career as a thriving capitalist and manager in the tech industry. Musk's markedly upper class background played a direct part in Musk's ability to move to and work in Silicon Valley; these experiences, in turn, led to Musk adopting the Silicon Valley ethic as everyday work practice in his companies. All of the above has played its part in elevating Musk to a status of a capitalist ideologue in service of startup-like work practices that Musk still regularly vouches for today.

Musk has been pushing his workers to adopt a Silicon Valley attitude to work with a similar rhetoric of working and being "hardcore" – as in the famous Twitter memo (*CNBC* 2022a) – for many years now. In 2012, Musk sent an internal memo to Tesla employees with the subject line "Ultra Hardcore." In order to scale up the company's production, Musk went about motivating his employees by writing: "Revolutionizing industries is not for the faint of heart […] I will personally make sure that those who produce exceptional results are rewarded exceptionally, as is fair and right" (*Bloomberg* 2022). The citation contains echoes of the Silicon Valley ethic's primary tenets

of working for a mission ("Revolutionizing industries") and the promise of a great payment that the employees can vaguely expect to receive sometime in the future.[14]

Musk has also promoted the "hardcore" work culture of his companies in public too. In early 2020, Musk's other major company SpaceX was holding a recruitment event in Texas which Musk advertised on his personal Twitter account. In a follow-up tweet, Musk outlined his principal expectations for potential future workers: "A super hardcore work ethic, talent for building things, common sense & trustworthiness are required, the rest we can train" (Musk 2020a; see *CNBC* 2020).

Silicon Valley values and motivation techniques were in part responsible for Musk buying Twitter in late 2022. Whereas Tesla and SpaceX try to save humanity in a very directly existential sense, the guiding mission for Twitter has been in Musk's mind to ensure the continuing potential for free speech in a democratic society. Musk has called Twitter the "de facto public town square" (Musk 2022b) where the failure to uphold principles of free speech will lead to democracy being severely undermined. In his goal of protecting the potential for free speech, Musk has described himself as a "free speech absolutist" (Musk 2022c; see *The Guardian* 2022a). Since his purchase of Twitter, Musk has however silenced and banned journalists and prominent critics of Musk on the platform (*CNN* 2022a), sought to have his own tweets seen more by Twitter users through changes to the platform's algorithm (*The Guardian* 2023), and reinstalled figures of the political far-right who were previously banned for inciting violence, spreading misinformation, and engaging in hate speech (*Business Insider* 2022b).

Musk's personal use of Twitter and his media persona at-large are integrally tied to Musk's current status as a capitalist ideologue in service of distinct values related to work practices. This media persona and its relation to Musk's politics will be discussed more at length as a final note in the present section.

Musk's public persona, along with being a noted genius and visionary (see *The Verge* 2018, *The Washington Post* 2022a), is heavily tied to a cultivated image of Musk being something of an online jokester. Musk is well-known enough for posting jokes and memes on his personal Twitter account

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[14] The memo in question was followed by another email that underlined the flexibility and lack of a more stable work-life balance that are expected at Musk's companies. In the email, Musk asks his employees to explain his demand for intense work to their respective spouses, families, and loved ones: "What it means is they will see much less of you for the next six months and there will be almost zero vacation […] Please reduce time off and travel plans to the absolute minimum necessary to maintain sanity and avoid divorce" (ibid.). Musk has used his "hardcore" rhetoric in multiple other company-wide emails (see *Business Insider* 2017, *Business Insider* 2021a).

that he has been profiled in *The New York Times* purely about these practices (see *The New York Times* 2021a). N.V. Davydovska has argued that Musk strives to build attachment and feelings of community with his followers by sharing more lighthearted content on Twitter. Through sharing memes and embracing specific online vernacular, Musk models himself as a member of "geek and meme communities" (Davydovska 2021, 20) and connects himself to parts of online culture associated with younger generations of people posting and sharing content online. According to Davydovska (2021, 17), Musk uses Twitter like this in order to create a friendly atmosphere among his followers and to bridge the gap that brings "the billionaire closer to common people."

Musk also uses Twitter to frequently engage with the news and politics of the day, often in a way that is mixed with his general register of joking around. Musk's personal political views have been the subject of debate (see *The New York Times* 2022b, *The New York Times* 2022c), but Musk himself has identified as a moderate in his political values (*Business Insider* 2022c). In recent times, however, Musk has recommended his Twitter followers to vote for a Republican Congress and backed right-wing candidates in other tweets (Musk 2022d, Musk 2022e; see *Reuters* 2022a). Musk, who has in the past voted for the Democratic Party in the U.S., has since said that the party has become a "party of division & hate" (Musk 2022f) and one that is "overly controlled by [labor] unions" (*CNBC* 2022b).

Musk's joke-y approach to politics is perhaps best exemplified by a meme posted by Musk on Twitter in early 2022, where a cartoon drawing of the Left-Right political spectrum argues a recent polarization of American politics:
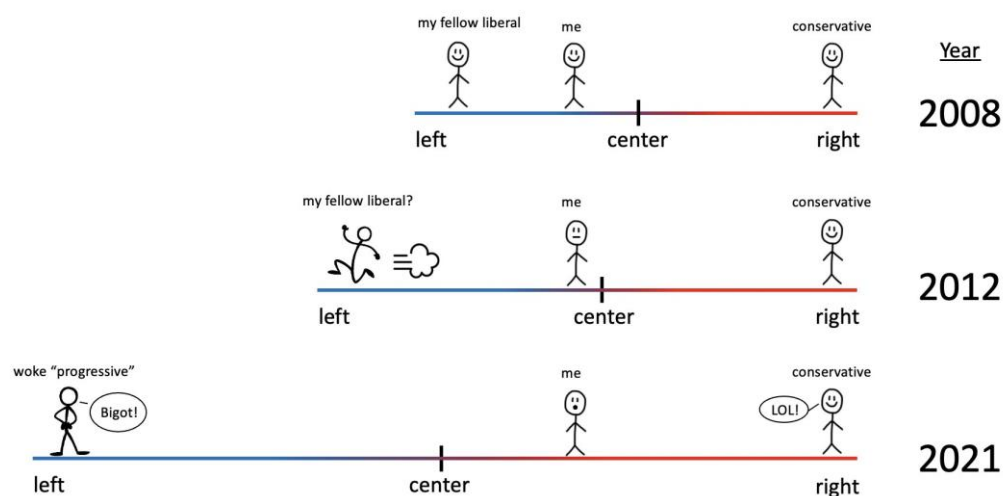
Figure 2 Political cartoon originally created by Colin Wright and posted
by Musk on Twitter in May 2022 (Musk 2022g).

By posting the cartoon, Musk suggests that the political Left has become more and more extreme in the past few years, which has in turn rendered him closer to the political Right on the spectrum overall. The tweet is a prime example of Musk courting his followers with joke-y content online, while at the same time engaging contemporary political debate that is marked by meaningful ideological consequences.[15]

I argue here that Musk's status as an online jokester contributes to his overall authority as a capitalist ideologue by making him seem more approachable and lighthearted to his followers. Musk's views on politics become more digestible and seemingly benign as he layers them in his joke-y rhetoric online. The approachability of Musk's online persona – when combined with a foundational authority based on his business success and status as an innovative genius – means that Musk's politics are on the whole received more openly and eagerly by his audience of over 136 million Twitter followers, even on the occasion when Musk talks about politics in a serious tone.[16] That there are clear anti-worker and anti-union sentiments woven into Musk's promotion of right-wing politics and media persona makes it all the more necessary to study the ideological sway and influence Musk wields over his followers online.

Musk has also used his Twitter account as a defensive tool in various ideological struggles about the work practices and allegedly toxic conditions at his companies. Most famously, Musk was deemed to be in violation of U.S. labor laws for a 2018 tweet that was seen as threatening Tesla employees for planning a company-wide union (*CNBC* 2021b). In the since-deleted tweet, Musk says Tesla employees are free to unionize, but would lose their stock options if they were to do so (ibid.). Even with the tweet ordered to be deleted, Musk has since continued to similarly flaunt Tesla employees' possibility of unionizing on Twitter, daring United Auto Workers to hold a union vote at the company (Musk 2022l; see *NPR* 2022).[17]

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[15] There have been numerous other instances where Musk's impulse to joke around has intersected with his political values (see Musk 2022h, Musk 2022i), extending even to direct interactions with high-level U.S. politicians (see Musk 2022j).

[16] Musk has offered commentary on Twitter, for instance, on news stories regarding Russia's 2022 war of aggression on Ukraine (Musk 2022k), the origin of the Covid-19 pandemic (Musk 2023a), a politically motivated attack on U.S. congresswoman Nancy Pelosi's husband (*The Hill* 2022), and the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the United States Capitol (Musk 2023b). Musk's tweets often generate news stories of their own (see *The Washington Post* 2022b, *NBC News* 2023), meaning that Musk's views tend to become widely seen beyond his immediate followers and thus are able to enter the given political discourse all the more firmly.

[17] Musk has displayed a continuing pattern of ideological domination in the form of union busting at his companies over the recent years (see *Vox* 2019, *CNBC* 2021b, *CNN* 2022b, *The Verge* 2023b).

Musk has also taken to Twitter to defend Tesla's decision to re-open its California plant in May 2020, relatively soon after the global emergence of Covid-19. In defiance of public health orders, Musk wrote on Twitter: "I will be on the line with everyone else. If anyone is arrested, I ask that it only be me" (Musk 2020b; see *The Guardian* 2020). The tweet served to obscure some of the ideological issues present in forcing workers to face unsafe working conditions by having Musk insert himself in the continuing production. The decision to re-open, however, is made ultimately to profit Musk and the company, making the tweet an attempt by Musk to shield himself from any incoming criticism.

In early 2022, Musk was accused of exposing himself and sexually harassing a SpaceX employee (*The Washington Post* 2022c). Soon after the accusation became public, Musk took to Twitter to post a deflective sexual innuendo about the scandal, writing: "Finally, we get to use Elongate as scandal name. It's kinda perfect. 🤣 " (Musk 2022m)[18]. The harassment scandal is a particularly egregious case of attempting to ideologically dominate a worker into submission, which Musk goes on to fight against and attempt to deflate through his Twitter account and through his jokester persona.[19]

This section has argued Musk as a capitalist ideologue in service of the Silicon Valley ethic and as a politically active advocate of work values based on domination of workers in general. The ethic and its practices have been present in Musk's formative personal experiences, his preferred work culture and management style in his companies, as well as being interwoven in Musk's overall public persona through his social media activity, news stories, and biographical accounts.[20] Through an

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[18] The quoted tweet by Musk and one of the Reddit comments that will be analyzed later include an emoji in their textbody. I have chosen here to quote the two texts as they were originally posted with the respective emojis intact.

[19] Allegations of a toxic work culture at Musk's companies extend beyond the union busting, disregard of health regulations, and Musk's sexual harassment. There have also been reports of high rates of injury (*The Guardian* 2017), generally poor working conditions with little time for leisure (*Business Insider* 2023), a climate of racial abuse (*Reuters* 2022b), a climate of sexual harassment by other employees (*The Washington Post* 2022d), as well as a culture of silencing criticism of Musk and the working conditions at his companies by firing the critical employees in question (*Reuters* 2022c). All of these allegations involve dimensions of ideological domination on the part of Musk's companies and could conceivably be linked to Silicon Valley practices of work and startup culture. Emily K. Crandall, Rachel H. Brown, and John McMahon (2021, 848) have spoken of the racial and gendered domination present in Silicon Valley's tech industry. Moreover, reports about employee exhaustion and higher rates of injury could conceivably be traced back to Musk's recurring demands of "hardcore" work and long hours at his companies. These individual allegations are, however, not at focus in this study, *per se*. Allegations of toxicity at Musk's companies crop up on Reddit's r/elonmusk with regularity. They also appear in the discussions about Musk's internal Twitter memo and the Reddit users' responses to the implementation of the Silicon Valley ethic at Twitter. It is due to this relation to the primary subject matter of the study – the r/elonmusk discussions about the ethic and Musk's work practices – that these allegations and reports are contextualized here.

[20] Musk continues to apply the ethic at Twitter today. There have been reports of Twitter offices being turned into bedrooms and of employees opting to sleep on the office floor in response to Musk's internal pressure to work hard

online jokester persona, Musk has been able to promote his values and work practices in a way that has rendered him more approachable as a public figure and that has helped create a notable sense of community with his followers online (see Davydovska 2021, 15).

2.3   r/elonmusk as Online Space for Musk's Following

This conception of Musk as an ideologue in service of the Silicon Valley work ethic lays the foundation for this study as it looks at how Musk's followers online react to his promoted work values. The ideology-theoretical analysis of r/elonmusk discussions will be done to see whether the forum at-large appreciates the values and participates – along with Musk – in their further diffusion in the media, or whether the users visiting the forum tend to be on the whole more critical of the ethic and Musk's promotion of it.[21]

The r/elonmusk forum is the most concrete manifestation of Musk's famed online following, with 1.4 million subscribers accrued since the forum's inception in March 2012 (Reddit 2023c). On Twitter, Musk's personal account has 136 million followers, but the problem with taking these followers as an object of analysis is precisely the immense breadth of the base of followers in question. Musk's is as of March 2023 the most followed account on Twitter, which means that among his followers there is a heterogeneous mix of celebrities, politicians, organizations, companies, and news outlets along with numerous private individuals. Musk's tweets receive replies that can range from people who idolize Musk – and who are "followers" in this sense of admiring Musk – to Twitter users who are maybe only mildly interested in Musk as well as those who are very critical of Musk. When replies from all of these users are mixed with potential organizational responses, it becomes increasingly harder to decipher where the "cult-like" following of Musk begins and where it ends on Twitter (see *Vox* 2017).

The r/elonmusk forum can, in turn, be treated to an extent as an online space with clearer values of admiring Musk present and as hosting Reddit users who feel a sense of community with Musk's online following. The most clear indication of the forum's admiration for Musk is how it describes its userbase in its official About Community banner. The base of 1.4 million subscribers are referred to as "Tesla Shareholders" in the banner, whereas users who are currently active and browsing the forum are in the process of "Building Starship" (Reddit 2023c). In the community's

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(*The Guardian* 2022b, *The Independent* 2023). Some employees have been asked to work 12-hour shifts 7 days a week – amounting to 84-hour work weeks – in order to meet deadlines personally set by Musk (*Business Insider* 2022d).

[21] As far as I am aware, there is no prior academic research done on r/elonmusk.

rules, the no. 1 rule of "No toxicity" is elucidated in a way that echoes SpaceX's company policies: "Similar to the company-wide policy at SpaceX, we have a no-assholery rule. This also means no rabble rousing" (ibid.). Moreover, the forum has an active running feed in its sidebar of Musk's latest tweets which regularly end up sparking new posts and active discussion on the forum.

The forum's About Community banner features the forum's official description, "Following Elon and his companies" (ibid.), but as discussed, the nature of community on Reddit can be elusive due to the platform's open structure which allows for and encourages movement between different subreddits. Users can be subscribed to multiple forums at once, and they do not have to be subscribed to a majority of the available subreddits in order to post and comment on them – this latter freedom to participate in the discussions applies to r/elonmusk as well. The forum discussions can feature Reddit users who are not "followers" of Musk in the sense of being admirers. They can also feature users who come into the forum and participate in the discussions with the express intent to be critical of Musk and his companies.

A fundamental premise of this study is, however, that the forum is delineated as a space for admirers of Musk and features a higher concentration of such "followers" than Twitter and other social media platforms.[22] Along the lines of this premise, the study presupposes that the r/elonmusk forum has the most potential to function as an echo chamberized online space around Musk and his values. In this function, the forum can potentially be seen as the most telling online space with regard to Musk's "cult-like" online following.

I argue that the concentration of Musk admirers on r/elonmusk exemplifies the "sense of community" (see Davydovska 2021, 15) that Musk tries to build with his social media engagement and active online presence.[23] As Musk becomes a more powerful and instrumental figure in media – particularly in the sphere of social media through his Twitter acquisition – he simultaneously becomes able to wield more considerable ideological influence in an effort to spread his particular

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[22] Facebook has an open group for discussion about Musk with a considerable base of 672,000 Facebook users (Facebook 2023). In comparison, the largest Discord server dedicated to Musk has only 2,700 registered users (Discord 2023).

[23] Musk himself does not have an active presence as a participant and user on the r/elonmusk forum. Musk has, however, participated 4 times in Reddit's own interview format Ask Me Anything (see Reddit 2015, Reddit 2016, Reddit 2017, Reddit 2020). Musk has also said that his own children were "mostly educated by YouTube and Reddit" (*Business Insider* 2021b), suggesting an awareness of the platform's reach. Furthermore, in a 2019 tweet, in response to an analysis by a Reddit user of Tesla's then-upcoming autopilot computer hardware, Musk posted his appreciation of the user in question saying: "Reddit is hardcore" (Musk 2019a). In a follow-up tweet, Musk added later: "Anyone who did this analysis should interview at Tesla" (Musk 2019b).

views and values. With its direct ties to Musk's social media and a general culture of admiration for Musk, the r/elonmusk forum and its visitors have an increasingly likely chance of being affected by Musk's ideologically charged public persona.

2.4 Ideology-Theoretical Methodology and Analytical Corpus

In answering the principal research question of this thesis – that is, does the r/elonmusk forum function as an ideological apparatus for the Silicon Valley ethic – I will employ an analytical framework of materialist ideology-theory[24] and its various critical insights. I have so far argued Reddit's ideological potential as a discussion platform as well as Musk's role as an ideologue in service of the Silicon Valley ethic. The material conjunction of these two ideological actors takes place, then, on the r/elonmusk forum as the Reddit users visiting the forum discuss events in Musk's life, his companies, as well as the potential merits and value of the Silicon Valley ethic.[25]

In studying the forum and seeking to answer the driving research question, the analysis will focus on the recurring discussion practices that help to define the forum's overall ideological nature. These discussion practices include, for instance 1) recurring subject matter and values in the forum's culture of discussion, 2) ways of structuring discussions through the platform's tree structure and the forum's own culture of debate and argumentation, 3) the forum's use of different registers and tones of discussion (e.g. serious, joke-y, off-topic, self-referential, or ironic), 4) the effect of Reddit's voting system on the general popularity and visibility of some comments over others, and 5) the effect of moderation and the application of forum-specific rules by the forum's team of user moderators.

The analysis will look at three of the most popular posts on r/elonmusk that deal with Musk's "hardcore" Twitter memo and its aftermath at the company. Two of the posts are based on news stories – by *CNN* and *The Guardian*, respectively – published on the day that the memo leaked to the public. The third post is in reaction to a tweet by *Fortune* magazine journalist Kylie Robison,

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[24] I use the hyphenated spelling of the term in accordance with Jan Rehmann and Projekt Ideologie-Theorie (see Rehmann 2013, 243).

[25] Of note is that the analysis will study r/elonmusk only with regard to how Silicon Valley work practices and values are discussed on the forum. The analysis will not produce an exhaustive characterization of the forum as a discussion space and potential ideological apparatus. The characterization presented will, however, serve as a basis to study the ideological functioning of the forum further and with respect to different ideologically-motivated themes and discussion topics.

posted two days later after a number of Twitter employees had decided to resign in response to Musk's memo:

• *Elon Musk gives ultimatum to Twitter employees: Do 'extremely hardcore' work or get out* (submitted November 16, 2022; see Reddit 2023e)

• *Elon Musk gives Twitter staff deadline to commit to being 'hardcore'* (submitted November 16, 2022; see Reddit 2023f)

• *What I'm hearing from Twitter employees; It looks like roughly 75% of the remaining 3,700ish Twitter employees have not opted to stay after the "hardcore" email. Even though the deadline has passed, everyone still has access to their systems.* (submitted November 18, 2022; see Reddit 2023a)

The three posts in question consist of 1,316 comments in total. To make the analysis more manageable and indicative of the forum's general ideological functioning, I will focus solely on the 10 most upvoted comments of each post and the replies received by these top comments. Based on the 10 most upvoted comments, I will do an initial analysis of the most recurring positive arguments in favor of Musk and his implementation of the Silicon Valley ethic at Twitter as well as the most prominent negative arguments against the shift in work culture. The analysis proper will then explore these arguments and the comments that they generate through the lens of the outlined discussion practices and their impact on the forum's overall ideological relation to the Silicon Valley ethic.

The discussion practices and their effect on the forum's ideological functioning will be analyzed with the help of methodological tools culled from the rich tradition of materialist ideology-theory. This materialist framework of the study will be argued more extensively in the following chapter, but here we can note its lineage in the social sciences which spans thinkers all the way from Karl Marx to Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Stuart Hall, and the German collective Projekt Ideologie-Theorie and its contemporary acolytes. Some of the principal tools adopted from this extensive lineage include:

• Projekt Ideologie-Theorie's notions of vertical and horizontal socialization as well as the ensuing effect of alienated community (Rehmann 2013, 248; Haug 1983, 12–13; Kyyrönen 2020, 84–85),
• Marx's elucidation of objective thought forms, including in the since-contemporized form of innovation and the wage-form (Marx 1976, 682; Ampuja 2021, 27),

- Althusser's subjectivizing concept of ideological interpellation coming from various ideological apparatuses and actors (Althusser 2001, 170–175),

- Hall's more discursive notions of "speaking through" ideology, internal fractioning within a ruling ideological bloc, and the "encoding" of ideological messages in media productions (Hall 1988, 42; Hall 2019, 272–274; Hall 2021, 101),

- Gramsci's categories of the organic intellectual of the ruling class, common sense, and "good sense" (Gramsci 1992, 12, 328).

Over the course of the present study, I argue that the relation of the r/elonmusk forum and its recurring discussion practices to the Silicon Valley ethic is best explicated and intervened in by this set of analytical tools. The tools can help us see how ideological values expressed on the forum can contradict one another and in this way participate in a wider ideological struggle about work practices. The discussed tools can also allow us to better understand the sometimes overlapping influence of various ideological actors on the forum discussions, including actors outside of Musk and Reddit as a platform.

Perhaps most saliently, materialist ideology-theory allows us to understand how ideological values tend to become normalized and accepted in capitalist society, while also holding on to the possibility of critique and intervention into the functioning of ideological structures. Representatives of Projekt Ideologie-Theorie have, for instance, expressed their methodological goal of having structures of ideological domination "wither away" into a society that is marked by democratic socialist values and governance (Rehmann 2013, 241–243; see Haug 1987, 60). Hall, for his part, has expressed a need for "strategic lessons for the socialist movement" (Hall 1988, 57) and an urgency for the Left to "bend the twig" (Hall 2021, 120) of everyday political discourse in his writing on the ideological rise of Thatcherism in the 1980s UK.

Materialist ideology-theory and its tools are employed in this study to offer a fuller picture of the r/elonmusk forum as a potential ideological actor in relation to the Silicon Valley work ethic. Through an ideology-theoretical analysis of forum discussions related to Musk's Twitter memo, I will determine whether the forum participates in further promotion of the ethic and whether it acts as an insulating echo chamber in relation to Musk's online following. In doing so, the analysis will also seek for all salient points of ideological intervention and critical rearticulation as the users discuss Musk and the ethic.

3   Materialist Ideology-Theory and the Silicon Valley Ethic

He goofs off a ton for someone demanding "hardcore" work.

–Reddit user on r/elonmusk, criticizing Musk's personal dedication to work

Whereas this study opened with a Reddit user accepting Musk's work practices wholesale (see section 1.1), the above quote shows a user commenting on r/elonmusk who sees inconsistencies in Musk's public image and reputation as a hard worker himself. In the user's view, Musk does not seem to be dedicating himself to work to the extent that he is asking his employees to primarily organize their lives around working at one of his companies. The user continues this line of argumentation in a follow-up comment, saying: "I think he makes himself look a lot busier than he actually is. Or put another way, I most likely would be fired if I was constantly tweeting from work like he does" (Reddit 2023e).

The two comments display a resistance to the hierarchical structure of domination that Musk is trying to put in place at Twitter. Whereas the opening comment of a Reddit user who would gladly work for Musk was a case of Musk successfully influencing someone in an ideological sense, the user quoted here sees the Silicon Valley work ethic and practices as something from which Musk himself seems to be exempt, an observation that becomes more critical when the user suggests that lower-level employees could likely not act as Musk does at their given workplaces.

This and the following section will look at how the possibility of this kind of critical resistance is understood in ideology-theoretical analysis, particularly within the field of contemporary media studies and with regard to social media. This discussion will require a further understanding of how ideology is conceived of as a phenomenon in academic literature and also of how the role of the critical scholar is understood within the same academic discourse.

In exploring these issues, I will further argue my stance of a materialist ideology-theory as the most potentially insightful and apt methodological basis for this study. The remaining two sections of this chapter (i.e. sections 3.3 and 3.4) will then focus on arguing the Silicon Valley ethic as a material and ideological set of work practices, further underlining the necessity of the materialist methodological approach.

3.1   Ideology on Social Media – Materialist and Idealist Traditions

Ideology as an academic concept is particularly contested and debated,[26] but its various meanings can be approached here through the two everyday definitions discussed briefly in the introduction (see section 1.2) – that is, ideology as political leaning or belief system and ideology as something distorting an individual's understanding of reality. The former of these definitions is particularly present in what Christian Fuchs (2017) has named the dominant paradigm in the study of digital media today, that is, large-scale computational data analysis informed by methods drawn from computer science. In studying echo chambers and the organization of political discourse online, data-driven studies in this vein often make reference to ideology as a given person's positioning within a Left-Right political spectrum.[27]

More often than not, big data studies such as these do not define ideology through its theoretical roots in social sciences and thus also do not treat the concept as a methodological tool of critical intervention. Rather, computational studies take the definition of ideology as political leaning as a given, in an approach that can be likened to be a descriptive method of analyzing political discourse in online media spaces. In his article on the dominance of big data analysis, Fuchs (2017, 47) calls for introducing more qualitative approaches and critical theory to the study of social media, citing the need for an alternative critical paradigm rooted in the social sciences to better analytically dissect online phenomena.

The second everyday definition of ideology – i.e. ideology as distortion of one's understanding of reality – is alive in other theoretical pockets of media studies. In 2014, John Downey, Gavan Titey, and Jason Toynbee published an article calling for the rediscovery of ideology as a critical concept in media studies – an echo of Stuart Hall's classic 1982 article calling for the same goal (see Hall 2005). In an effort to revitalize Hall's famous formulations about ideology and the media, Downey et al. argue for increased study of the media's role in maintaining relations of domination in society. In doing so, they put forth an understanding of ideology as misrepresentation and misleading beliefs

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[26] The contestation of the concept is in fact so ingrained that it has become a routine rhetorical opening for studies of ideology to refer to this very contestation. For books and articles centered on the concept of ideology that make the same rhetorical opening that I too have indulged in here, see Lichtheim 1965, Larrain 1983, Thompson 1984, Eagleton 1991, van Dijk 1998, Rehmann 2013, Fuchs 2016, and Kyyrönen 2020.

[27] For studies of online media spaces and ideology in the vein of big data analytics, see Wojcieszak & Mutz 2009, Bond & Messing 2015, Roozenbek & Palau 2017, Zimmer et al. 2019, Guest 2020, De Francisci Morales et al. 2021, Morini et al. 2021, and Rieger et al. 2021. Many of these studies have assumed Reddit and its more political subforums as their object of analysis (see section 2.1).

that "[serve] the interests of the powerful at the expense of the poor" (Downey et al. 2014, 885; see also Downey & Toynbee 2016, 1265).

This call for more critical analysis was followed by a host of other articles dissecting Hall's legacy in media studies and the vitality of ideology as an analytical tool. Most of the debate took place in the longstanding journal *Media, Culture & Society*, where Downey et al. published their original call for discussion and where Hall too contributed his own essays in the 1980s.[28] In most of the articles inspired by Downey et al., ideology is treated principally in epistemological terms – as a kind of belief, illusion, or misrecognition of social relations. This epistemological approach allows for critical analysis to intervene in ideology by stepping outside of it, to a degree, and by arguing ideology as a form of distortion about reality that can be deconstructed and expelled from people's minds.

The methodological proposals put forth in *Media, Culture & Society* are in different ways connected to the idealist tradition of seeing ideology as false consciousness, i.e. as something that misdirects people and offers a distorted view of reality (Thompson 1984, 81; Rehmann 2013, 5– 6).[29] The approach has become unpopular enough in the past decades that some of the scholars involved in the media studies debate have chosen to include disclaimers about the approach in their articles, denouncing an express adherence to the notion of ideology as false consciousness (see Corner 2016, 267; Downey & Toynbee 2016, 1266; Phelan 2016, 280). Even with the disclaimers, however, many of the scholars in question argue methodological reinventions that see critical analysis as stepping outside of ideology and piercing through its veneer of misleading illusion – be it through tools acquired from critical realist philosophy, affect theory, study of myth, or social psychology (see Couldry 2015, Corner 2016, Downey & Toynbee 2016, Guardino 2020)

The materialist interpretation of ideology – the one I argue for and apply in this thesis – offers an alternative to ones based on idealist premises. There has not been much express materialist

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[28] The debate around Hall's legacy took place mostly between 2014 and 2016. For the articles contributing to this re-evaluation of Hall and ideology in *Media, Culture & Society*, see Downey et al. 2014, Couldry 2015, Scannell 2015, Corner 2016, Dawes 2016, Downey & Toynbee 2016, and Phelan 2016. Matt Guardino (2020) has also participated in the discourse though not in the same journal. A precursor to the exchange was had some years earlier by some of the same scholars in question. These earlier papers act as reference points in the later debate (see Corner 2001, Downey 2008).

[29] The understanding of ideology as false consciousness goes back to readings of the early works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, namely their book *The German Ideology*, originally written between 1845 and 1846 (Eagleton 1991, 87; see Marx & Engels 1998). The false consciousness approach was for a long time considered the dominant Marxist interpretation of ideology, but has since significantly fallen out of favor and extensive academic application (see Eagleton 1991, 10–11).

ideological analysis of social media spaces;[30] I will hence argue my approach with primary recourse to the ideology-theory developed in the social sciences. The approach will further be defined against those arguing for the study of ideology and social media from the perspective of false consciousness. The two Reddit comments from r/elonmusk that were quoted at the beginning of this chapter will serve to highlight the principal differences between a materialist and an idealist approach to ideology on social media.

One of the major materialist criticisms made against treating ideology as false consciousness concerns the role of critical analysis and science in the contesting of ideological domination. In 1988, Hall himself – who I argue should be more intimately linked to the materialist lineage than the idealist one, the latter type of connection which the scholars in *Media, Culture & Society* appear to be doing – criticized the false consciousness approach for how it depicted the masses of people operating under illusions and distortions. In Hall's (1988, 44) words, the approach sees the general masses as "the dupes of history," whereas the critical scholar can somehow see through ideological illusions and into a given truth about reality through a privileged position or form of knowledge.

The result of treating ideology as false consciousness is thus that the masses can not, in effect, resist the influence of ideology by themselves, but rather need the help of the critical scholar. The materialist lineage, on the other hand, sees scientific analysis as participating in ideological struggle and resistance, but also as something that is often not sufficient on its own to effect very great change. Rather, critical analysis needs to inform and support the struggle of the masses through its own set of academic means and practices. (Hall 1986, 29; Kyyrönen 2020 39–40.)

This is the method of ideology-theoretical intervention that I have described earlier (see sections 1.2 and 2.4). The principal goal in this thesis is to analyze and constructively rearticulate potential support for the Silicon Valley ethic as found on r/elonmusk, but also to encourage critical arguments posted about the ethic to be extended further and expressed more intently and forcefully. The premise that underlines this goal is that it is possible to effectively intervene in ideological struggle taking place on social media through materialist and critical tools of analysis.

Social media and ideology are engaged most prominently in *Media, Culture & Society* by Nick Couldry who writes about the myth of collectivity that social media platforms like Facebook can engender among their users. Couldry (2015, 637) speaks out against the notion that these platforms

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[30] Nick Couldry's (2015, 641) article in *Media, Culture & Society* makes gestures towards a materialist influence adopted from Hall, but Couldry's approach is all in all more indebted to idealist conceptions of ideology as we will see.

are where "all opportunities for the transformation of society and politics are played out" and argues instead that the notion is an intentional illusion that platforms like Facebook uphold for further financial gain. There is no collectivity online until a platform calls for one, and even then the possibility of such collective activity is "being produced for motives that simulate a certain politics, yet remain fundamentally commercial" (ibid. 643).

A similar line of argumentation is pursued by Fuchs – one of the most prominent and prolific media scholars today and open advocate of the false consciousness approach to ideological domination (see Fuchs 2014, 102; Fuchs 2016, 370–371). While not part of the debate in *Media, Culture & Society*, Fuchs (2014, 102) argues that treating social media as participatory is itself an ideological illusion that "does not see how capitalist interests predominantly shape the Internet." For Fuchs, social media spaces as they are today are "non-participatory" (ibid. 102) and need to be replaced by an alternative, non-corporate Internet altogether.

In characterizing social media as non-participatory, Fuchs would seem to be referring to the possibility of enacting transformative or even revolutionary politics through social media, much like Couldry (2015, 637) does in his article. For Fuchs (2014, 102), however, the ideological issue seems to extend to more or less all activity and engagement had on social media, as he goes on to argue that "[B]ig corporate and, to a lesser extent, political actors dominate and therefore centralize the formation of speech, association, assembly and opinion on social media." According to this line of argumentation, the principal content of discussions and shared opinion posted on social media would seem to be greatly determined by the profit-motive of the corporate actors that run social media platforms.[31] The critical analyst, in the vein of Fuchs or Couldry, would then strive to point out and dispel the ideological illusion of participatory engagement and community that social media platforms offer in their quest for profit.

I argue that a materialist ideological analysis of social media would engage more intently with the phenomena that Fuchs is referring to – namely, the formation of speech, opinion, and community online – in the interest of actively participating in forms of everyday ideological struggle taking

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[31] Fuchs (2014, 104), arguing from the point of view of critical political economy of the media, would seem to confirm this analytical emphasis later in writing: "[O]n Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc., users are fairly active and creative, which reflects Cultural Studies insights about the active character of recipients, but this active and creative user character is the very source of exploitation, which reflects Critical Political Economy's stress on class and exploitation." The argument is made less clear by Fuchs' use of "participatory" to refer to mainly political organization online, when the term is primarily used in media studies to refer to the type of active and creative engagement with social media that Fuchs himself describes here (see van Dijk 2009, 42). Fuchs' call for a non-corporate Internet speaks towards a broader condemnation of all participation and engagement with social media platforms as they exist in their corporate-driven form today.

place online. The Reddit user who suggested that Musk "goofs off a ton" (Reddit 2023e) and spends his days tweeting instead of working is – according to the materialist view – engaging in a form of ideological struggle against Musk's media image and his promotion of Silicon Valley work practices. The comment is posted on Reddit and can in this activity certainly be tied to Reddit's primary economic interest of having active users on its platform, but that does not mean the comment's criticism and pushback against ideological domination involved in Musk's work practices should be overlooked as a potential site of struggle and thus analysis.

Couldry (2015, 643) is more cautious of the two discussed scholars, saying that social media practice should not be neglected in ideological analysis. The overall idealist argument about social media would, however, seem more geared towards revealing the participatory illusion present in social media engagement which, in turn, would as an elected approach lead to less involved analysis of ideological contestation taking place on social media, as in the case of the quoted comment from r/elonmusk.

To be sure, Reddit as a platform and media company is in its general activity defined by a guiding profit-motive. The company is run with advertising revenue, a business strategy that is built around the selling of targeted ads that are based on information that users share about themselves on the platform (see Reddit 2023b). This profit-motive is baked into the platform's algorithmic structures that encourage users to continuously move between different forums and subreddits. The vastness and free movement within Reddit allows for the platfrom to gather more specific and specialized data about its userbase that is then capitalized on through the selling of ads. (Gillespie 2018, 126–127.)

It could in fact be argued that the ideological factors discerned earlier – that should be considered in any analysis of Reddit as an ideological space (see section 2.1) – can all be traced back to the platform's overall profit-motive. These factors and distinct qualities of Reddit as a platform actively shape the discussions had on r/elonmusk too. However, rather than seeing these discussions as non-participatory or as merely extensions of Reddit's profit-motive, I argue that they should be engaged with in detail to see how they are shaped by Reddit as a particular ideological and capitalist platform. This greater engagement will, in turn, help us answer the driving question of how the discussions themselves can partake in ideological struggle, in this case about Musk's widely publicized and applied work practices.

Until there is a viable alternative to corporate social media, like Fuchs (2014, 102) aspires to and outlines, media companies like Reddit will continue to influence and shape the ideological values

and practices that its userbase engages with on a daily basis. Intervening critically in this engagement and promoting anti-neoliberal values through academic analysis can for its part expedite the realization of a media landscape where profit-driven companies like Reddit have less influence and can even be done away with in the long-term. This eventual phasing out of ideological actors and apparatuses is a shared ambition between the two different critical approaches to ideology (cf. Rehmann 2013, 242–243).

Materialist analysis of social media can do what idealist analysis strives to, in that it can approach social media platforms as capitalist actors whose interests serve to condition and "predominantly shape" (Fuchs 2014, 102) the content and discussions had on the platforms. Moreover, the materialist tradition can help us see how this conditioning affects the everyday ideological struggle had on a given platform and through that analytical focus help to effect progress towards a wider embracing of anti-neoliberal values at-large. Treating ideology as an illusionary false consciousness does not advance this level of ideological struggle occurring daily on social media.

3.2   Socialization and r/elonmusk as Ideological Apparatus

There are many other key differences between the materialist and idealist traditions,[32] besides their relation to the role of science and critical analysis in ideological struggle. An important advantage of the materialist tradition is how much more effectively it can be used to analyze the often overlapping influences of various different ideological actors occurring at once.

This multidetermination of influence can be better seen by looking at, for instance, the Reddit comment that was quoted at the very beginning of this thesis. A user posting on r/elonmusk responded in a forum discussion about Musk's "hardcore" Twitter memo: "I would work for him if I was 20, had no girlfriend, or kids, and was looking for a motivating challenge. To maybe retire at 30. Musk is hardcore […]" (Reddit 2023a).

The comment could be approached from an idealist point of view in arguing that it operates under the illusion of participation and engagement in political debate, in this case about work life and values, that is beneficial to Reddit's function as a profit-seeking media company. Even more

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[32] Whereas the idealist tradition sees ideology as a phenomenon within one's consciousness, materialist ideology-theory sees ideology as constituting consciousness (Koivisto & Pietilä 1996, 43). Idealist tradition also upholds a rough dualism between matter and thought that materialist theory rejects (Kyyrönen 2020, 8). Furthermore, idealist tradition is often accused of not sufficiently explaining the origin of ideological phenomena (Rehmann 2013, 5–6). Fuchs and Couldry's brand of idealist analysis seems to attribute illusions of participatory engagement to the studied media corporations and thus the relevant material actors. Their attempts at ideological influence, however, are reduced to non-material notions of illusion and myth.

specifically, the comment could be seen as fulfilling Reddit's desire as a platform to host and gain financially from users who contribute to the platform's overall dominant culture of geek-y masculinity (see section 2.1). Musk, with his online following that he regularly engages with politically (see section 2.2), could be seen as wanting to uphold this illusion of participation too. Musk and Reddit working together to maintain the illusion would still conform to Fuchs' (2014, 102) argument of corporate and political actors striving to "dominate and therefore centralize the formation of speech […] on social media."

Arguably, however, Musk's primary ideological influence on the comment is not to enforce an illusion of political participation, but rather to gain more widespread acceptance for the startup-like work practices he applies at his companies and regularly promotes in the media (see section 2.2). Musk can still be seen as benefitting as a capitalist actor from people operating under false consciousness and accordingly engaging in debate on social media, in the way that all those working to uphold a capitalist mode of production benefit from the functioning of profit-seeking corporate media. However, to centralize this ideological illusion in analyzing the r/elonmusk comment would be to overlook the fact that Musk also wants his online following to engage with and adopt his political values, particularly regarding his preferred work culture. This political engagement online benefits Musk as a prominent capitalist and entrepreneur more directly and efficiently than the general illusion of political engagement taking place online would.

The single Reddit comment of a user wishing to "retire at 30" (Reddit 2023a) is thus under multiple different and even contradictory ideological influences. This determination of a comment through multiple influences has consequences on the functioning of the forum as a whole, as a collection of shared arguments and discussions that act as the forum's primary media content. The variety of these influences needs to be traced carefully when analyzing r/elonmusk comments in order to get a better understanding of the forum as a distinct ideological space.

The idealist argument of social media as non-participatory (Fuchs 2014, 102) and as propagating a myth of community (Couldry 2015, 642) recalls a debate had within materialist theory regarding the functioning of ideological apparatuses. The debate has to with Louis Althusser's (2001, 132–133) influential materialist conception of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), which ensure the subjection of individuals to ruling ideology and thus help reproduce the relations of production. The institutions discussed through the category of being an ISA include the church and other religious institutions, schools, political parties, the media, cultural institutions, and the family unit, among others (ibid. 143).

Ideology in these apparatuses functions through the act of interpellation, that is, of calling or hailing to individuals to recognize themselves as subjects to ruling ideology. For Althusser (ibid. 170–175), the act of interpellation fundamentally constitutes us as ideological subjects – a status that already necessarily defines us and which will always remain inescapable.

Althusser's materialist conceptions greatly influenced Hall and other scholars in the 1970s, but he was also criticized for these latter functionalist tendencies of his theory. Functionalism in the context of ideology-theory refers to a perspective of ideology from above that "disregards the actual contradictions and struggles in social institutions in favour of considering their function for the stabilisation of domination" (Rehmann 2013, 152). Althusser (2001, 161) claims that we will always remain ideological subjects, no matter the historical situation or the constellation of apparatuses that structure society at a given moment. Put another way, there is no room for resistance of ideology or for internal contradiction within ideology in Althusser's theory of ideological apparatuses (see Hall 1988, 47–48).

Much in this vein, Couldry and Fuchs seem to be arguing an understanding of all social media engagement as being defined by the ideological illusion of participation, in a way that leaves no room for contestation or contradiction within the given media apparatus. However, as we have seen, there are instances on r/elonmusk where a comment engages in critique of capitalist hierarchies of work – i.e. the two comments accusing Musk of not working and "goofing off" (Reddit 2023e) – that both Reddit and Musk as ideological actors would most likely want to uphold. Moreover, we have seen how a comment that is supportive of these hierarchies of domination ("I would work for him if I was 20 […] (Reddit 2023a)) can actually be defined by competing and contradictory ideological influences. Musk would want the user to truly engage with and adopt his work practices, whereas Reddit as a capitalist apparatus only wants to foster a distorted image of such engagement to uphold a capitalist status quo.

I argue thus that the idealist argument of social media as non-participatory and as upholding an illusion of engagement should be dismissed. Social media platforms like Reddit still need to be analyzed in terms of their capitalist motives and given ideological values, but here I argue that the materialist tradition can offer a more engaging and insightful set of analytical tools for the goal in question.

In what follows, I will briefly lay out one of the most incisive and thoroughly outlined materialist understandings of ideology, as put forth by the German collective Projekt Ideologie-Theorie. This discussion will be done to better argue the main theoretical disposition of this thesis and to

illuminate further how I choose to approach the discussions had on r/elonmusk about Musk and the Silicon Valley work ethic.

Emerging in the late 1970s,[33] Projekt Ideologie-Theorie tried to adjust and amend some of the totalizing, functionalist tendencies in Althusser's theory of ideological apparatuses. The group of scholars did so by refining and elucidating the analytical concepts of *the ideological powers* as well as of *socialization* – these concepts are instrumental to the present study as well.

Socialization [from the German term *Vergesellschaftung*] is most often used to describe the adapting of individuals to society through social norms that the individuals go on to interiorise (Rehmann 2013, 248). Often used in his writing by Karl Marx, the notion can also be thought of as "making society," (ibid. 248) in that it shapes and helps realize social relations on all conceivable levels (Koivisto & Pietilä 1996, 47).

Wolfgang Fritz Haug, the founder of Projekt Ideologie-Theorie, has recognized a particular dimension of socialization as coming "from above" to shape social relations. Socialization from above is the domain of the ideological powers – a collection of institutions, apparatuses, intellectuals, and other actors that serve to uphold a social order marked by domination (Haug 1983, 12–13; Rehmann 2013, 4–5).

The concept of an ideological power is derived from Friedrich Engels (1969, 49) who recognized the State as the "first ideological power over man." Other ideological powers to shape social relations and everyday human practice include the law, religion, education and philosophy (Haug 1983, 12; Rehmann 2013, 50, 59).[34]

As the ideological powers historically emerged and ascended "over man," their function became to mediate hierarchical structures of domination in society (Rehmann 2013, 243; see Kyyrönen 2020,

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33 Projekt Ideologie-Theorie was founded by Wolfgang Fritz Haug, with Jan Rehmann being a prominent member of the collective since the 1970s. The scholars associated with the collective have produced a notable ideological survey of the rise of fascism in Germany and altogether a set of "the most extensive empirical-historical analyses in support of theory development ever provided in the field of ideological analysis" (Koivisto & Pietilä 1996, 41). Projekt Ideologie-Theorie's formulations have also found considerable support in Finnish ideology-theoretical studies (see Koivisto & Pietilä 1996, Torssonen 2019, Kyyrönen 2019, Kyyrönen 2020, Ampuja 2021). When I reference the formulations of Projekt Ideologie-Theorie in the analysis, it is primarily with regard to Haug and Rehmann. Depending on the context, however, the reference can also extend to include the other proponents of the collective mentioned here.

34 The ideological powers named here are comparable to the list of Ideological State-Apparatuses put forth by Althusser. Projekt Ideologie-Theorie has made the distinction, however, that not all ideological institutions are necessarily state-apparatuses. By forgoing the express connection to the state, the apparatuses belonging to the ideological powers are seen as more flexible and prone to change in their respective relations of force. (Rehmann 2013, 152.)

111, 116). This mediation is their task of socialization from above, of "making society" in a manner to upkeep the hierarchical structures in question (see Koivisto & Pietilä 1996, 46–47). For Projekt Ideologie-Theorie and its adherents, socialization from above in this manner is the very definition of the ideological (Haug 1983, 12; Haug 1987, 68).

Put another way, the ideological powers serve to reproduce an "antagonistic social order" (Haug 1983, 12), one originally based on division of labor in society and its related class discord (Koivisto & Pietilä 1996, 47). What I argue here is that Reddit and Musk, as the prominent capitalist actors that they are, should be seen as belonging to the ensemble of the ideological powers.

Musk – as a thriving capitalist with over 100,000 employees (*Reuters* 2022d) – reaps benefits from the labor of this workforce and thus from established hierarchies of labor domination more successfully than almost any other entrepreneur alive (see *Time* 2021a). Moreover, in his role as a capitalist ideologue and intellectual in the media (see section 2.2), Musk works to promote his variations and applications of these hierarchies of domination in the name of Silicon Valley work values. Musk's interpellation of his work values in the media is directed at his considerable online following, to make the values seem overall more appealing and acceptable as everyday practice – this is the act of socialization from above that Musk engages in as an ideological actor.

Reddit, for its part, acts as an ideological apparatus in that it is a platform designed to generate and collect vast amounts of data about its users that can subsequently be sold for advertising profit. It is in Reddit's interests as a media company that current capitalist economic structures remain in place so that it can continue to profit from the online traffic and engagement it generates. Partly how Reddit makes sure that these structures continue to be dominant is to promote content and the creation of communities which cohere around values that complement the capitalist status quo (e.g. the political subforum r/The_Donald and the misogynist[35] hub r/KotakuInAction, see section 2.1). These communities are often tied to Reddit's dominant culture of white masculinity and geek-y interests (see Massanari 2019, 20), marking the demographics that Reddit primarily tries to socialize to act in support of its principal capitalist goals.

These are the primary ways in which Musk and Reddit participate in shaping social relations and upholding structures of domination as part of the ensemble of ideological powers. In these roles – Musk as a capitalist ideologue and intellectual, Reddit as an ideological media apparatus – the two

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[35] Projekt Ideologie-Theorie sees patriarchal gender relations as preceding and supporting the emergence of the ideological powers. The effect of this pre-statal patriarchy extends to contemporary forms of capitalist labor relations. For more discussion on the relation of ideology and gender-based domination, see Rehmann 2013, 245–248.

constituents of the ideological powers do their part in reproducing the antagonistic social order that today is marked most significantly by neoliberal capitalism.

Socialization by the ideological powers can in Projekt Ideologie-Theorie's view be overlapping and contradictory, thus escaping the functionalist accusations of Althusser's theory of apparatuses (Rehmann 2013, 152).[36] The view from above of the ideological powers – their vertical manner of socialization (Haug 1983, 14) – is complemented in the critical collective's theory with the notion of contesting ideology through horizontal socialization.

Horizontal socialization – or self-socialization – refers to efforts by people to establish consensual control over their living and social conditions (Haug 1987, 59). In other words, the concept describes the efforts by communities to regulate their everyday life without the intervention of the ideological powers (Rehmann 2013, 248).

In the context of this study, the comments on r/elonmusk arguing that Musk "goofs off a ton" and "makes himself look a lot busier than he is" (Reddit 2023e) could be seen as having the seeds of horizontal socialization. The comments question the hierarchical structures of domination present in Musk's companies in suggesting that lower-level employees would likely not be able to spend their workdays as Musk does. If this argument found further resonance with other Reddit users visiting r/elonmusk, the forum could be in a position to build consensus about rejecting the kinds of oppressive and subjugative work practices Musk applies at his companies.

This potential consensus would be an initial step in curbing the influence of Musk as an ideological power with regard to everyday work practices. Full-fledged horizontal regulation of a given community's practices would, however, require much more active political engagement and intervention into the present structures of work and management that are being discussed. This need for active worker organization holds true for changing the work culture at Musk's companies too.

Jan Rehmann, a leading proponent of Projekt Ideologie-Theorie, notes that horizontal socialization can not ever appear in a pure form, as it were. Social relations in a class society are necessarily in some ways conditioned by vertical socialization coming from the ensemble of ideological powers (Rehmann 2013, 250).

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[36] Projekt Ideologie-Theorie and its proponents see analytical value in Althusser's conceptions of apparatuses and ideological interpellations. These concepts appear regularly in analyses made within the Projekt Ideologie-Theorie framework (Rehmann 2013, 174).

In the case of the critical comment on r/elonmusk, the user is inevitably conditioned by Reddit's structure as a profit-seeking social media platform and also potentially by parts of Reddit's overall culture of discussion and thematic interests (see section 2.1). The user would also seem to be socialized enough by Musk's prominent media image (see section 2.2) to be aware of and reference Musk's consistent presence on social media. Here, that socialization from above is turned into more of a horizontal aid and resource as the user suggests that they would likely be fired from their job for "constantly tweeting from work like [Musk] does" (Reddit 2023e).

Horizontal socialization in Projekt Ideologie-Theorie's formulations can not be pure, but it can be supported and encouraged through critical analysis. This possibility for support and intervention is the principal motivator of the critical collective's ideology-theoretical project. As their driving methodological goal, the proponents of Projekt Ideologie-Theorie see the rendering of the ideological powers as ultimately obsolete in their function of upholding structures of domination in society. This goal is achieved by replacing the oppressive vertical forms of socialization of the ideological powers with consensual and self-socialized political activity and engagement.[37] (Haug 1983, 13–14; Koivisto & Pietilä 1996, 47.)

This brings us back to the primary research question of this study: Does the r/elonmusk forum act as an ideological apparatus in service of the Silicon Valley ethic and its related work values? Is the forum itself yet another ideological actor socializing individuals into accepting the work values and practices that Musk himself already notoriously promotes in the media and to his followers?

In answering these questions, I will take methodological cues from Projekt Ideologie-Theorie and strive to disrupt the forms of vertical socialization taking place on the forum, as users visiting the subreddit will more than likely find themselves interpellated simultaneously by both Musk as a media figure and Reddit as a discussion space. In doing so, I will also encourage and further advocate any contestation and horizontal forms of resistance to Musk and the Silicon Valley ethic that the users display in the forum discussions.

It is important to note that the analysis will study r/elonmusk as an ideological apparatus only with regard to the spreading of Silicon Valley work practices and values. In other words, the analysis

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[37] Accomplishing this does not, however, strip the ideological powers – e.g. the State and other legal institutions – of all of their functionality in society. The methodological goal of Projekt Ideologie-Theorie is rather to eradicate the hierarchical structures of domination that these ideological powers reproduce in everyday life (Koivisto & Pietilä 1996, 47).

will not produce an exhaustive and definitive characterization of the forum as an ideological space, but rather an initial starting point for further study of the forum and its values.

Another important distinction is that, even though we have here designated Reddit as an apparatus of neoliberal capitalism, the analysis can not define Reddit's relation to the Silicon Valley ethic as a platform and as a whole. Aside from r/elonmusk, Reddit hosts many other forums where contemporary work practices and values might be discussed. Some of the forums would likely not participate in the promotion of the Silicon Valley ethic based on their expressed value sets and thematic interests.

For instance, the platform hosts the subreddits r/socialism and r/antiwork, both of which prominently express anti-capitalist agendas in their official descriptions and community information (see Reddit 2023g, Reddit 2023h). The forums in question are also quite popular on Reddit,[38] suggesting that the platform's wide array of content is not inescapably marked by the platform's noted political culture of fostering hateful, right-wing politics based on domination and discrimination (see section 2.1).[39]

This distinction about Reddit's vastness means that the r/elonmusk subreddit is treated here as a potentially distinct apparatus that is operating within and conditioned by another apparatus, as it were. This further distinction highlights the particularity of social media forums as objects of analysis within media studies: The analysis here will have to navigate how it is best to approach an online forum where the primary media content – that is, the given collection of posts and discussions – is determined to a great degree by the ideological influence of multiple different and even external actors. This influence can potentially go beyond just the influence of Musk as a media figure and Reddit as the host platform to include other ideological actors too, depending on what the users posting on r/elonmusk deem relevant to the discussions and include in their comments. The users' creative role in sustaining the forum as a discrete online space with express values – for instance, through content moderation – will also need to be investigated.

Another way to look at the analytical objective is to see whether the discussions on the forum cohere into a recognizable promotion and acceptance of the Silicon Valley work ethic. However, a

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[38] As of April 2023, r/antiwork had 2,5 million subscribers, whereas r/socialism counted 438 000 users among its subscribers. In comparison, r/elonmusk's total number of subscribers reached 1,4 million in the same month (Reddit 2023c).

[39] A study of how Silicon Valley work practices are discussed on Reddit at-large would have to be considerably more comprehensive in scope than the present study. It is very possible though that Reddit's dominant political culture of discussion would lead to an overall endorsement of the work practices if the issue were to be studied more extensively.

forum like r/elonmusk has its primary content generated by an unwieldy and freely moving userbase that is also determined in its activity by multiple different ideological actors, including Musk and Reddit as a platform. Any potential overriding sentiment about or promotion of the Silicon Valley ethic would seem to have to be reconstructed in the analysis after the fact by looking at the dominant trends in the discussions.

This issue can be illuminated further with Hall's influential theory of mass media engagement and ideology. Hall (2019, 272–274) recognized traditional mass media apparatuses as "encoding" dominant messages in their productions, as in the case of a television news program. Television viewers watching the program could then read along with the encoded message and accept the message as initially coded, or they could read against the dominant code and strive to renegotiate the program's message in some way.

Taking cues from Hall's theory: Can a social media forum like r/elonmusk have a dominant "encoded" message in the way Hall describes in his influential formulation? Rehmann (2013, 175) has compared Hall's notion of encoded message to Althusser's functionalist acceptance of an ideological interpellation without questioning. If the r/elonmusk forum were to have a clear message about the Silicon Valley ethic, it could more conceivably function as an ideological echo chamber that insulates itself from contradictory points of view with "little or no scrutiny" (KhosraviNik 2017, 64).

The question remains, however, whether a social media forum can have encoded messages in the same way as traditional mass media apparatuses, considering the relatively unwieldy way in which its primary content can be determined. This question and its further implications will have to be developed along the course of the analysis.

The present and the previous section of this chapter have argued the materialist ideology-theoretical disposition of this thesis and the materialist analysis of r/elonmusk as an online space. Projekt Ideologie-Theorie, with its conceptualization of the ideological powers and socialization, provides the principal understanding of ideology applied here, but this understanding will be supplanted by insights adopted from other materialist theorists too.

This group of materialists includes Hall, who I will try to reclaim to the materialist side of analysis within media studies following the debate on Hall's legacy in *Media, Culture & Society*. The debate saw attempts to rebrand Hall as an ideology critic in the idealist vein (see Downey et al. 2014, 878; Dawes 2016, 285; Phelan 2016, 275), which does not correspond to the understanding at-large of

Hall within the social sciences (see Rehmann 2013, 244; Koivisto & Pietilä 1996, 42–43). In arguing for Hall's rightful place within the theoretical discourse, I will also concurrently argue for the primacy of materialist analysis of ideology and contemporary media phenomena over the idealist analysis present in *Media, Culture & Society* and in Fuchs' critical work.[40] This argument for the greater utility of materialist ideology-theory is particularly extended to the study of social media platforms, as their userbases often interact in the overlapping ideological influence of multiple different material actors.[41]

To further argue the relevance of materialist theory to this study, I will in the following section argue the Silicon Valley work ethic as a distinct set of ideological work practices and values. This discussion of the ethic will be done through first looking at the historical lineage of the work ethic as a general concept. I will then trace some of the defining economic structures which help maintain the Silicon Valley ethic as a dominant set of practices in the Silicon Valley area's tech startup scene.

3.3   Silicon Valley and the Motivating Mission – Work Ethic as Exploitation

Whereas the false consciousness approach defines ideology as a distortion in the individual mind, materialist ideology-theory locates ideological phenomena as embedded in real-life practices that have a material existence. For this study, the most central real-life practices looked at are the work practices that constitute the Silicon Valley work ethic.

The primary elements of the ethic as recognized here are:

1) working for a grand and motivating mission that will greatly benefit or even save mankind in an existential sense (Crandall et al. 2021, 844; see Mannevuo 2015, 115),

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[40] I do, however, agree with Fuchs' (2017) call for more critical ideological analysis of the media, in opposition to the currently dominant big data studies that treat ideology as mere political leaning.

[41] The majority of the articles in *Media, Culture & Society* and also Fuchs speak of ideology critique, whereas this study represents a more critical ideology-theoretical analysis. The distinction between the two approaches corresponds to one of the key differences between an idealist approach and a materialist approach: Ideology critique will focus on criticizing and deconstructing its objective of analysis, a given ideological phenomenon, whereas an ysis will take into account a phenomenon's larger relations in society in order to understand its genesis and overall functioning (Rehman 2013, 5–6). Within ideology-theory, there can still be further distinctions made between a critical approach and a neutral approach to ideology. Projekt Ideologie-Theorie represents a critical ideology-theory in that the collective believes that the ideological powers can be intervened in and have their functions of domination cease altogether and be rearticulated (ibid. 244–245). A neutral approach, such as the one Hall represents, sees ideology as something that constitutes consciousness and social relations, but that will also exist as a source of constant struggle regardless of the amount of critical analysis carried out (Koivisto & Pietilä 1996, 42–43). Neutral and critical tools of ideology-theory can, however, be used jointly and harmoniously in analysis (ibid. 42) which is what I plan to do as well in studying the presence of the Silicon Valley ethic on r/elonmusk.

2) working extensively long days with the hours that are worked overtime often going unpaid (Mannevuo 2015, 129–130),

3) an expectation of great flexibility that obscures lines between workers' personal and professional lives (Benner 2002, 38; Crandall et al. 2021, 847),

4) working in small dedicated teams with an ostensibly flat hiearchy of operation (Hyrkäs 2016, 122–123; Mannevuo 2015, 121),

5) the promise of a big payout through excercised stock options, once a company becomes successful enough and either goes on the stock market or is sold (Ross 2004, 10; Aran 2018, 1239).

In this and the following section, I will talk more in depth about how these practices have become so central to the Silicon Valley startup culture that Musk continues to adhere to with his companies. I will do so by first placing the Silicon Valley ethic within a historical continuum of the work ethic as a general concept in the present section. The following section will then focus on discussing the economic structures that have been instrumental in establishing the flourishing startup scene in Silicon Valley.

Through this discussion, I will argue the Silicon Valley ethic[42] to be an ideological set of work practices and values. This designation will help us to better understand why some of Musk's followers on r/elonmusk might find the ethic and its practices appealing and thus be successfully interpellated by Musk's promotion of the practices in the media.

The work ethic as a concept can be seen as referring to a set of values that define how work is approached as a social norm and moral obligation in a given society (Weeks 2011, 11). Investigating the work ethic as a concept means to try to answer the question of why we work as much as we do and why do we continue to do so with the level of willingness that is expected in many forms of labor (ibid. 37–38). In other words, why have we designated work with all of its necessary burdens as the "vital center of living" (Rodgers 1978, xi)? In the case of the Silicon Valley variation of the ethic, the question could be asked as to why Musk's employees choose to work at his respective companies even with the requirements of 80-hour work weeks (*Business Insider* 2022d) and otherwise reported poor conditions (*Business Insider* 2023).

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[42] The Silicon Valley work ethic as a concept was coined by Emily K. Crandall, Rachel H. Brown, and John McMahon (2021, 842), on the basis of Kathi Weeks' elaboration of the neoliberal work ethic. Silicon Valley and its work practices have been studied under different monikers and in many fields by others too. For more discussion about the practices, see Benner 2002, Ross 2004, Ekman 2009, Mannevuo 2015, Doody et al. 2016 Hyrkäs 2016, Cable 2017, Aran 2018, Aran 2019, and Koskinen 2022.

In her extensive study of the concept of the work ethic, Kathi Weeks has argued that along with economic and structural reasons of maintaining one's livelihood, many of us work due to the personal and social meaning attributed to work. Work can be a source of "meaning, purpose, structure, social ties, and recognition" (Weeks 2011, 37) and in pursuing these values we often give our individual consent to working hard, alongside the more structural necessity of working to live. These spheres of motivation are obviously deeply intertwined and influence one another, but they can be used here to structure the discussion and better understand the Silicon Valley ethic's key practices and their ideological functioning.

Issues of consent and personal meaning are particularly relevant to ideology-theoretical pursuits. Materialist theorists hold that what makes ideology effective is often what is true about it and what about it makes sense to a given individual, as opposed to ideology working through distorted or false accounts of things (see Hall 1988, 46). To understand how the work ethic as a general concept has harnessed this individual consent and how the Silicon Valley ethic harnesses it now, we need to take a brief look at how the work ethic historically emerged and changed conceptions of work's important role in daily life.

The centrality of work in daily life is often attributed to the development of the original Protestant work ethic that – as described by Max Weber's (2001, 25) influential study on the subject – called on for work to be approached "as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling." The notion of treating one's work as a calling is still present in contemporary manifestations of the work ethic (Weeks 2011; 43, 72).

For the Protestants of 16th century Europe, the elevation of work to a calling and the center of everyday life came from God and concerned all men and all kinds of work (Rodgers 1978, 8; Weeks 2011, 44). Work was a way for Protestants to partly secure their own religious salvation without dependence on religious institutions and authorities, and thus marked a sense of autonomy and individuality for the faithful workers in question (Weeks 2011, 51). What was new about the Protestant work ethic compared to previous work conceptions was the dedication and diligence involved in treating work as a calling – this notion of Protestant dedication would go on to try to effectively take over the "daily routine of life with its methodicalness" (Weber 2001, 101).

Weber (2001, 13), writing in the early 1900s, tried to understand in his study why a "spirit of capitalism"[43] had gone on to flourish among Protestant groups in Germany (see Hollow 2022, 1349). He would go on to argue that the Protestant work ethic had given Protestant business owners a spiritual incentive to work diligently and to maximize their profits along the way (Weber 2001, 109; Hollow 2022, 1349). The notion that all work should be treated as if a calling was moreover useful in that it "legalized the exploitation of this specific willingness to work" (Weber 2001, 121) and thus made the work of these business owners and employers appear to be a destined calling of its own (see Weeks 2011, 53). The path of the dedicated Protestant worker to independence and autonomy turned out to be a path to waged labor and a dominating relation of subordination instead (ibid. 51).

By the industrial age of the late 19th century, the personal willingness and consent involved in treating work as a calling had undergone a secularization. As opposed to aiding dedicated workers on their journey to salvation, the work ethic now helped the waged laborer to "improve [their] lot" (Rodgers 1978, 12) by promising greater levels of social mobility (Weeks 2011, 46). Particularly in an American industrial context, hard work and dedication were seen in this time as "certain escalators of success" (Rodgers 1978, 12).

By the Fordist-era of mass production and working in assembly lines, the value of independence originally associated with the work ethic had been replaced by expectations of lifetime compliance and obedience to one's employer (Weeks 2011, 70). The industrial work ethic was more so instrumental for the ruling capitalists of the time in its ability to secure employees that could be easily directed through clear commands and guidelines. The worker's personal and individualized contribution to work was seen as less essential in the production process as a whole. (Koskinen 2022, 45.)

In opposition to this lack of subjective investment, the central calling of work has in the contemporary era of neoliberal capitalism become one of self-actualization through one's work (Koskinen 2022, 46; Farrugia 2022, 34). The neoliberal worker is expected to be flexible and dedicated (Koskinen 2022, 47), innovative and original (Ekman 2019, 143), as well as extensively creative and social (Weeks 2011, 69–70) in their given employment. Working in a neoliberal

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[43] Weber was writing from an idealist point of view, but Weeks (2011, 40) points out that even Weber conceded a need for further materialist and economic explanations for all cultural changes in dominant work conceptions. The notion of a work ethic in this study, particularly in relation to Silicon Valley and its notorious culture of tech startups, is treated as a material collection of distinct practices and values that shape everyday working culture for a host of companies and workers alike.

economy comes with expectations of "collapsing of work into the self" (Farrugia 2022, 21) as well as seeming to truly love one's job – a requirement that is increasingly extended not only to high-salaried workers, but also to those working lower-waged jobs too (Weeks 2011, 70–71). The reward for this level of dedication is a promise of great personal meaning and self-actualization, a motivational promise that allows for work to gradually take over and displace other potentially meaningful areas of life (ibid. 76–77).

The neoliberal worker assumes a managerial and entrepreneurial perspective of themselves in relation to work (Ekman 2019, 148; Koskinen 2022, 42). As the responsibility of success lies with the individual (Verhaeghe 2014, 177), the neoliberal worker must be constantly acquiring new skills (Koskinen 2022, 42) and be able to construct a marketable personal brand through their work (Verhaeghe 2014, 163). At the same time, workers are encouraged to have their values and motivations parallel those of their place of employment (du Gay 1996, 57–58). By making work be about personal values and self-actualization, neoliberal capitalism has succeeded in absorbing critiques of the dehumanizing parts of industrial production into itself in a way that encourages further allegiance to work (Koskinen 2022, 45). In encouraging workers to adopt an invested managerial perspective on themselves, the neoliberal work ethic has successfully rendered workers in great many fields as "architects of their own better exploitation" (Henwood 1997, 22).

The Silicon Valley work ethic is in many ways built on top of the neoliberal expectation of personal investment (Ross 2004, 9–10), but takes another left turn in what it defines as the principal calling that makes workers want to dedicate their time to work. Instead of self-actualization, a startup worker in the tech industry would more likely be motivated by a desire to change the world for the better somehow and potentially even to save humanity at-large with their work (Crandall et al. 2021, 844; see Mannevuo 2015, 115). What distinguishes the Silicon Valley ethic as its own particular configuration is an orientation towards "endless wonder, innovation, and growth" (Crandall et al. 2021, 843) that recalls the spiritual commitment and salvation that were salient in the original Protestant ethic.

Emily K. Crandall, Rachel H. Brown, and John McMahon argue that Silicon Valley as a tech industry hub has made its name through restoring a sense of magic to the world and to working life. Operating in the face of various ecological and resource crises, the Silicon Valley approach to work marries a "utopian technological progress with (re-)enchanted imaginings of progress, Mars settlements, cyborgs and endless innovation" (ibid. 844). Like neoliberal capitalism incorporated into itself lessons from the industrialist era, it could be argued that the tech industry – with its

emphasis on progress and wonder – has tried to absorb into itself and defuse some of the critique directed towards neoliberal greed that has, for its part, been instrumental in causing the contemporary era of climate and other crises.

Working to better the world is most present in Silicon Valley managerial discourse through the rhetoric of having a vision or some kind of guiding mission for one's company and its trajectory (Koskinen 2022, 15, 43–44; Doody et al. 2016, 860). Musk's missions for his companies of saving the world from the climate crisis through electric vehicles and of setting up a human colony on Mars are likely the most famous examples of such visionary rhetoric (see *The Independent* 2021, *Forbes* 2022). Musk uses these guiding missions to manage and motivate his workers, as we have seen in memos where he speaks of "revolutionizing industries" (*Bloomberg* 2022) in order to convince his employees to work more and longer days while seeing their families less (see section 2.2). These missions motivate Musk's calls for commitment from his employees that regularly balloons up to 80-hour workweeks (see Vance 2015, 17, 177, 336).

This managerial motivation technique does not, however, reach every worker and every level of employment to the same degree. Mona Mannevuo (2015, 129) has noted how workers in the tech industry elevate their sense of meaningful work by contrasting their work to that carried out by more traditional industrial laborers of today. Likewise, Crandall et al. (2021, 853) make the argument that Musk's passionate, world-changing rhetoric is not directed in the same way to the lower-waged service workers that are still employed at his companies.

The Silicon Valley emphasis on a grand and motivating mission is, in other words, a managerial practice that is mostly directed towards a distinct section of middle class and highly educated tech workers. Through the rhetoric of the mission, the Silicon Valley ethic dominates these workers (Mannevuo 2015, 129), but also pushes down other forms of labor as less significant and worthwhile on the whole. In these two salient ways, the Silicon Valley ethic participates in upholding ideological structures of domination within the tech industry, while being promoted and celebrated in the name of "endless wonder, innovation, and growth" (Crandall et al. 2021, 843).

The discussion in this section of work as a calling and as an instrument for achieving personal meaning – be it in the form of salvation, social mobility, self-actualization or saving the world – shows that the work ethic in all its historical forms has been used for the better exploitation and domination of workers. The work ethic as a changing set of values has shaped material work conditions and what is expected of workers with regard to their personal dedication to work.

These issues of personal meaning and willing consent to work are, in this sense, inextricably tied to issues of class and economic structures that immensely define work practices in their own right. The basic economic structures that keep Silicon Valley's startup culture running and in place will be discussed further in the next section.

3.4   Equity Payment and Masculine Sacrifice of the Silicon Valley Ethic

Two of the outlined five key qualities of the Silicon Valley ethic – namely, working in small teams and expecting a big payout through stock options – go back to the origins of startup culture in the Silicon Valley area in the 1950s. Working at a company called Shockley Semiconductor Laboratory in 1957, a group of eight scientists decided to leave the company due to poor management and to start their competing business together. This "traitorous eight" (Hyrkäs 2016, 24) needed funding for their company and eventually received it from a wealthy entrepreneur named Sherman Fairchild. The deal made with the financer involved a 10% ownership share of the company for each scientist (Aran 2018, 1261) as well as shared control of the company's management structure which was designed to have no rigid hierarchy in order to "create an intellectual atmosphere in which creativity would flourish" (Blasi et al. 2003, 7).

The company in question, Fairchild Semiconductor, is thought to be the first venture-backed startup in Silicon Valley (Aran 2018, 1243). The company served to establish the industry model for how tech startups are run and financed to this day, that is, often with the help of risk-taking venture capitalists like Fairchild. The group of scientists involved with the company in question reproduced their financing scheme multiple times over, and in the process of doing so, formed the economic backbone of Silicon Valley and its still prospering tech industry (Hyrkäs 2016, 24).

Tech startups today still cohere around small and dedicated teams of engineers that prefer a flat managerial hiearchy in order to better realize their enchanted, progressive visions of the future (Hyrkäs 2016, 122–123; Mannevuo 2015, 119–121). Alongside receiving salaries, these engineers and workers are often paid for their work in equity, i.e. most often meaning stock options (see Aran 2019, 869), which affords these workers a real sense of ownership and stakes in the success of their given company (Ross 2004, 10). The monetary compensation through equity comes with the promise of a company going public on the stock market through an Initial Public Offering (IPO), or by the company being sold once it has become successful enough (Cable 2017, 615–616). This is the moment when startup employees can cash out their stock, resulting in the Silicon Valley ethic's key promise of an eventual big payout (Ross 2004, 10; Aran 2018, 1239).

Together, these basic structural traits of Silicon Valley startup culture – that is, an emphasis on small teams and equity-based compensation – lead workers in the industry to accept poor working conditions and excessive demands in terms of their daily working hours (see Crandall et al. 2021, 847–848). More time is devoted to work because of the sense of ownership that employees have for their company, with their promise of a large payout being so closely tied to the company's potential success. While waiting for the opportunity to cash out their stock, workers will accept overtime and working hours that often go unpaid altogether (Mannevuo 2015, 130; Crandall et al. 2021, 853).[44] Working in small teams that are struggling with financing and resources early on in a startup's journey can further lead employees to accept 80-hour workweeks in order to ensure the survival of the company.

Musk regularly pays the employees at his companies with stock options (*CNBC* 2021b), though the companies have since outgrown outside of the confines of being fledgling startups. As with the notion of a guiding and motivating mission, the compensation method would again seem to be more so directed towards motivating middle-class employees who are not in a very precarious financial situation and thus are able to forgo more direct cash payments in the short term. Workers who are primarily compensated in equity can likely afford being paid lower wages in the short term in order to potentially realize an economic and social goal of becoming very successful and wealthy, a widespread ambition that the media serves to uphold by presenting only the stories of successful startup founders like Musk (see Crandall et al. 2021, 848).[45]

Attaining such success is, however, very unlikely and reaching for it involves great risks for startup workers, particularly due to most startups failing in their early years (Hyrkäs 2016, 22; see Perry et al. 2018, 2). It has been moreover debated if startup employees are able to make informed enough decisions as investors as they choose a path of being paid in equity.[46] Those who are deemed

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[44] The practice of not paying workers for overtime in the tech industry is further enforced by two legal measures in the United States. The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) specifies that computer professionals who are employed as a "computer systems analyst, computer programmer, software engineer, or other similarly skilled worker in the computer field" (Department of Labor 2019a) may be exempt from being paid for overtime. Moreover, the FLSA designates business executives as similarly exempt in the case that they own at least a 20% equity interest in their company (Department of Labor 2019b). This latter exemption adds a further incentive to offer stock options and equity-based compensation to workers in fledgling startups in an effort to save on immediate costs going to paying workers their wages based on all of the working hours provided.

[45] This is not to suggest that there are no workers in precarious situations who choose to accept equity-based payment while working in a startup. In his historical survey of the Silicon Valley labor practices, however, Chris Benner (2002, 214) notes that stock options are "highly concentrated in the upper stratum of the labor market" in the area's startup scene.

[46] Legal scholars have, for instance, questioned whether startup companies provide enough information about their overall valuation to potential employees – such information being integral in understanding the value of one's received

informed enough are routinely referred to in academic literature as "gamblers" (Cable 2017, 627) for indulging in the risk of not receiving their big payout due to a company potentially failing. All the more, even though Silicon Valley startups operate with an ostensibly flat hierarchy (Crandall et al. 2021, 854), it is salient to note that equity-based compensation will most often benefit those with the largest amounts of shares – often celebrated founders and managers like Musk – who will use the payment method to lower overall costs for their companies and to ensure the availability of relatively inexpensive labor.

Whereas the Silicon Valley call for a guiding mission in work operates more as a personal motivating value, there are also more economic and structural reasons that drive workers in startups to dedicate themselves to work – namely, the motivation of becoming very wealthy through an equity payout. Both the economic and personal motivations are built on existing class structures and are used by workers to further secure or even improve their given social standing. Both types of motivation also lead startup workers to accept poor working conditions, a likelihood of wages not being paid in full, and working hours that serve to undermine a stable work-life balance.

However, even these two driving motivators do not fully explain why excessively long work days and expectations of great flexibility – two remaining key traits of the Silicon Valley ethic – are so widely accepted and embraced practice in tech startups. Long work days and great flexibility are present in the currently dominant neoliberal conception of work too (see Weeks 2011, 70–72). These neoliberal practices provide a basis on which the Silicon Valley ethic is built on, a foundation that is further intensified by the historically notorious precarity of Silicon Valley's flexible labor market (see Benner 2002, 38–39)

The entrepreneurial neoliberal worker is also coded through values of masculinity that contribute to the expectations of dedication and immense use of one's time for work (see Koskinen 2022, 42). This masculinity is likewise further intensified in the male-dominated tech industry of Silicon Valley, where sacrificial working hours are seen as an intoxicating and motivating part of the industry by its sizable proportion of white male workers (Mannevuo 2015, 130; Crandall et al. 2021, 845–846). This celebrated sacrifice of white geek masculinity, then, does its part to undermine and devalue the work provided in the industry by lower-waged workers, women, as well

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equity (Aran 2019, 871–872). For more discussion about the risks involved in equity compensation in startups, see Cable 2017.

as racially marginalized groups (Crandall et al. 2021, 848–849) – again displaying how reliant the Silicon Valley ethic and its values are on existing structures of oppression and discrimination.

Along with economic and personal motivations, the intoxicating motivation of masculine sacrifice contributes to the elevation of work as a central value – often at the expense of most other pursuits in life – within Silicon Valley's widely celebrated culture of tech startups. With these motivations in mind, we can turn once again to the pointed comment from r/elonmusk that opened this study:

I would work for him if I was 20, had no girlfriend, or kids, and was looking for a motivating challenge. To maybe retire at 30. Musk is hardcore […] (Reddit 2023a).

In their desire to work for Musk, the Reddit user in question would seem to fulfill many of the discussed motivations as part of their conditional checklist: They are looking for a "motivating challenge," much akin to one of the guiding missions that define the motivational culture at all of Musk's companies. The user has hopes that they could "retire at 30," a reference to the promise of a big payout tied to equity compensation at technology startups and companies. Finally, the user implies that they would be ready for the flexibility and long hours expected at Musk's companies by suggesting that they would take a job with Musk in case they were "20, had no girlfriend, or kids."[47]

In the introduction of this thesis where this comment was originally discussed (see section 1.1), I asked why the user would accept a job with Musk knowing the types of intense and dominating work practices that are regularly applied at Musk's companies. The motivations and key qualities of the Silicon Valley ethic outlined in this chapter are why – i.e. the promise of working for a great mission that benefits humanity, the promise of becoming rich through your shares in a tech company, and the near-narcotic thrill of sacrificing huge parts of your time and life for work.

These reasons are also why the Silicon Valley ethic should be treated as an ideological set of work practices and values. The attractions of the ethic, the qualities that make sense (see Hall 1988, 46) to many workers in the industry, are also used to convince workers into accepting poor working conditions, increasingly long working hours, and a lack of clear delineation between work and one's personal life.

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[47] The user's gender identity should not be inferred through the comment alone. The latter remarks can, however, be read to suggest a heteronormative worldview where the user identifies as male and is looking for a girlfriend with whom to start a family. Reddit allows its users to stylize their personalized avatars where users often express their gender identity through stylization options. The user in question has not stylized their avatar in any way. The user's gender identity should thus not be asserted here. If the user did identify as male, the comment could be read as supporting the discussed dimensions of masculinity involved with the Silicon Valley ethic.

I argue that the Reddit user in question has been successfully interpellated by Musk's calls for these kinds of dominating work practices, be it through Musk's "hardcore" memo to Twitter or by some of the other instances where Musk has promoted the ethic through his media engagement (see section 2.2). The question now remains as to what extent are other users on r/elonmusk socialized vertically like this into accepting these work practices as desirable and as something to try to attain. To what extent do the users resist and argue against Musk's ideological promotion of the Silicon Valley ethic? These questions will drive the analysis of the next two chapters where I will focus on the wider reaction of the r/elonmusk forum and its userbase to Musk's "hardcore" Twitter memo.

4   Implementing the Culture: Arguments in Favor of Musk and the Ethic

With the ideology-theoretical framework of the study set and with the Silicon Valley ethic contextualized more thoroughly (see chapter 3), the discussion can move on to a more in-depth analysis of r/elonmusk and its discussion practices. The objective is to find out what the role of the forum is in the ideological promotion and further socialization of the Silicon Valley work ethic as an accepted set of work practices. In answering this, the analysis also strives to figure out how the forum relates to the notion of being an echo chamber for Musk's online following, where users insulate themselves from any points of view of contradicting or questioning their potential admiration of Musk (see De Francisci Morales et al. 2021; Morini et al. 2021).

The analysis focuses on a single media event, that is, Musk's infamous leaked memo to Twitter employees where he urges his new employees to be "extremely hardcore" and work "long hours at high intensity" (*Business Insider* 2022e, *CNBC* 2022a). Titled "A Fork in the Road," the memo was publicized on November 16, 2022, and issues an ultimatum to Twitter employees to accept the new work culture and be part of "Twitter 2.0" or to quit. As such, the memo is perhaps the most widely seen and distributed act of promotion for the Silicon Valley work ethic, as applied by Musk at his companies.

The memo and its aftermath generated a lot of discussion on r/elonmusk. The analysis in the following two chapters will strive to see to what extent the Reddit community of r/elonmusk accepts the ideological interpellation of the ethic and to what extent does the userbase deny it. Through an analysis of the principal lines of argumentation and the most preferred comments per user upvotes on the forum, the goal is to arrive at an understanding of what role the forum itself may play in the promotion of the Silicon Valley ethic.

The corpus of the analysis consists of three posts made on r/elonmusk surrounding the news story of Musk's memo. These are, in order of their date of submission:

- *Elon Musk gives ultimatum to Twitter employees: Do 'extremely hardcore' work or get out* (hence referred to as P1, submitted November 16, 2022; see Reddit 2023e)
- *Elon Musk gives Twitter staff deadline to commit to being 'hardcore'* (P2, submitted November 16, 2022; see Reddit 2023f)
- *What I'm hearing from Twitter employees; It looks like roughly 75% of the remaining 3,700ish Twitter employees have not opted to stay after the "hardcore" email. Even though the deadline*

has passed, everyone still has access to their systems. (P3, submitted November 18, 2022; see Reddit 2023a)

As happens often on Reddit, a post is initiated by the sharing of a link to another website and such is the case with the three posts in question too. In order, the posts correspond to:

- P1 – a news story published by *CNN* (*CNN* 2022c),
- P2 – a news story published by *The Guardian* (*The Guardian* 2022c),
- P3 – a tweet published by journalist Kylie Robison of *Fortune* magazine.[48]

The titles of the posts correspond to the headlines of the news stories and the entirety of Robison's tweet, respectively.

The three posts are chosen because they are the largest discussions had on r/elonmusk about Musk's memo to Twitter employees. All three posts have reached over 100 comments individually, with their added total reaching 1,316 comments altogether.[49] In this breadth of discussion, the posts can be treated as largely indicative of the forum's general disposition towards the Silicon Valley ethic.[50]

To cull the 1,316 comment corpus to a more manageable qualitative analysis, I have chosen to focus on the 10 most upvoted comments of each post and their replies. As a piece of guiding contextualization for the analysis, I have categorized the 10 most popular comments of each post in the following table, according to their general attitude towards Musk's implementation of the Silicon Valley ethic at Twitter:

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[48] The tweet in question has since been deleted but can be accessed through the website Internet Archive (see Internet Archive 2023).

[49] At the moment of data collection on January 10, 2023, P1 had 765 comments, P2 had 195 comments, and P3 had 356 comments. The three posts were found by using the keyword "hardcore" on Reddit's internal search function and by limiting the results to r/elonmusk. The search returned three additional posts referencing Musk's memo, but these were ruled out of the analysis due to their relatively small size and the already sizable nature of the corpus at hand.

[50] In having one of the posts – that is, P3 – take place two days after the remaining posts, the analysis can also see if there are signs of development in this general disposition. The tweet by Robison was published and discussed two days after the release of Musk's memo, when a large section of Twitter's remaining employees had chosen to resign in response to the memo. Having the analyzed posts span this short but meaningful period of time allows us to see how the discussions on r/elonmusk change after the adverse effects of Musk's memo have become more clear.

	P1	P2	P3
Positive	5	3	0
Negative	2	5	9
Neutral/Questioning	1	0	1
Joke Response	2	2	0
	10	**10**	**10**

Figure 3 How do the 10 most popular comments of each analyzed post
relate to Musk's implementation of the Silicon Valley work ethic at Twitter.

While there are numerous positive responses in the first two posts, we can see that they are altogether displaced in the third post dealing with the Twitter memo's aftermath. The latter consists mostly of comments which are, in one way or another, critical about how Musk has attempted to transition Twitter's workforce under a more startup-like management.

The table can not tell the whole story of r/elonmusk's reaction to the Twitter memo, however, because it does not get into the weeds of the argumentation present on the forum. In what way are the top comments being favorable to or critical of what Musk is doing with Twitter? Moreover, upvoted comments on Reddit are more often than not accompanied by replies by replies from other users that challenge or extend the argumentation presented in some way – the same goes for the positive and negative comments on r/elonmusk.

Focusing on the 10 most upvoted comments and their replies still leaves 672 comments for the analysis to consider. To structure the discussion and limit the number of comments analyzed, I have chosen to group the most recurring arguments in the top comments in relation to Musk's implementation of the Silicon Valley ethic at Twitter. Divided along the lines of positive and negative arguments, the most recurring arguments on the forum are:

POSITIVE ARGUMENTS

(in favor of Musk's actions):

1. *Twitter Staff Is Lazy and Spoiled*

2. *Musk's Work Culture Has Worked Before*

3. *Tech Work Requires Flexibility and Dedication*

NEGATIVE ARGUMENTS

(critical of Musk's actions):

1. *Transition of Twitter's Work Culture Is Too Chaotic*

2. *Musk Has No Vision for Twitter or Appealing Mission for Its Employees*

3. *Work Environment in Musk's Companies Is Toxic*

The arguments will provide the main structural frame for the discussion to follow: Each section of analysis will focus on one of the arguments and see how the top-voted commenters go about arguing them. The discussion will then be problematized by considering the replies received by these commenters that pertain most to the Silicon Valley work ethic and its implementation at Musk's companies. This will allow us to see how the arguments are developed and how differing views are negotiated, while also allowing the analysis to contain the still relatively large size of the comment corpus.

The present chapter will focus on the positive arguments put forth in favor of Musk introducing the Silicon Valley ethic at Twitter. The comments discussed in the chapter come from both P1 and P2. The negative and critical arguments made in response to Musk's Twitter memo will be discussed in chapter 5. The comments in chapter 5 are mostly culled from the top comments of P3 with its clear emphasis on negative responses to the Twitter takeover.[51]

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[51] While the outlier top comments, that is, the "Neutral/Questioning" and "Joke Response" comments, also make up a considerable part of r/elonmusk as a discussion environment, they will not be discussed separately here. As such, they do not explicitly contribute to a further understanding of how the forum and its users relate to the Silicon Valley ethic and its practices. The joke comments have an ideological functioning in providing a distraction from the rest of the discussion, but it would be harder to analyze their contribution much further. One of the two prominent neutral comments will be discussed briefly in a footnote pertaining to its thematic in section 5.3.

4.1 "Twitter Staff Is Lazy and Spoiled"

4.1.1 Musk Is Right – Speaking Through Ideology

P1–C4[52]   79 △ ▽

I understand this is shit for staff, but twitter is losing money.

From what we saw inside twitter, it seemed like everyone was just coasting along. Business is business, if you want to be able to enjoy a iced mocha frappe in your 1 hour lunch break with free food, how about you help the company turn a profit?

Musk is right, twitter can only change with a lot of hardcore changes which will take a lot of hardcore work. That's life, deal with it.

P1–C10   16 △ ▽

Maybe it's not as well known as many organizations keep it under wraps and quietly work in the background, the last few years brought an incredible number of untalented leeches into the IT industry. Many thousands of non-participants and individuals that do not significantly contribute to organization outcomes are starting to get weeded out at the same time as all this other bs. Reset time. This is probably going to turn out very well for Twitter as the company reorganizes and develops a necessary and dedicated workforce. Many times it's a small group of intelligent, hard working individuals who carry the weight of many others. I'm very interested to see how all this turns out.

The quoted comments make the joint case in favor of Musk implementing the Silicon Valley work ethic at Twitter by arguing that "Twitter Staff Is Lazy and Spoiled"[53] and that, in a sense, the remaining staff at the company should be whipped to shape by Musk's tougher work culture. Comment P1–C4 suggests that, before Musk's takeover, Twitter's staff was "just coasting along" (P1–C4). The staff was run with employees unwilling to work who would rather "enjoy a iced mocha frappe with your 1 hour lunch break with free food" (P1–

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[52] Discussed comments are given a reference code where the first part (P + number) indicates the Reddit post in which the comment is posted and the second part (C + number) indicates the placement of the comment in the 10 most upvoted comments of its post – C1 being the most upvoted of a given post. In discussing replies to these comments, a third number will be added which indicates the order that the replies are quoted for the purposes of this analysis. Each reply thread – that is, a series of replies posted to a specific top comment – will start its count from 1. Each quoted comment will also be accompanied by the number of upvotes it has received, indicated by the number on the top right hand of the comment (number + △ ▽). Using a code to refer to specific comments will secure further anonymization of the comments by not including the usernames of the Reddit users in question. The formatting used here owes a debt to the precise formatting used by Jaakko Dickman (2021) in his study of the comment sections of alt-right news website *Breitbart*.

[53] The positive and negative arguments that structure the discussion are formulated by me based on the discussed r/elonmusk comments. Within the text, I will refer to them in quotation marks and in capitalized letters, so as to distinguish them from cited passages taken from the comments themselves.

C4)[54], as opposed to helping Twitter turn a profit. Likewise, comment P1–C10 suggests the tech industry has seen a rise in the number of "untalented leeches" and "non-participants" who do not help their companies to "significantly contribute to organizational outcomes" (P1–C10).

The argument in the comments is built on a set of premises about what constitutes a good worker, in opposition to a lazy and ineffective one. The premises would seem to owe a debt to both prominent Silicon Valley values as well as a more widespread neoliberal conception of a worker dedicated to their job.

The most direct marker of Silicon Valley influence is the wholesale adoption of Musk's terminology in comment P1–C4. The user argues that the changes Musk is effecting at Twitter will require "a lot of hardcore work" (P1–C4), making a direct reference to Musk's memo to Twitter employees urging them to be "extremely hardcore" (*CNBC* 2022a).

The comment can be seen as an example of what Stuart Hall (2021, 101) describes as "speaking through ideology," or formulating our thoughts within it, as the user simply quotes Musk's "hardcore" notion of work and adopts it as their own personal view. Hall argues further that ideologies work most effectively when a person is unaware the statement they are formulating about the world is based on ideological premises. Here, the user seems very aware that they are directly adopting Musk's language ("Musk is right […]" (P1–C4)), but it is more difficult to ascertain to what extent they are aware of the ideological domination present in this act of adopting Musk's terminology.

Hall (2021, 101) remarks further that ideology has the ability to make us utter "simply descriptive statements about how things are (i.e., must be)." In adding "That's life, deal with it" (P1–C4) after their adoption of Musk's rhetoric, the commenter in question gives an impression that they have very much so accepted the value of "hardcore" work as part of their common sense view of the world. The user goes on to further support Musk's proposed changes at Twitter with another statement of "how things are" or must be in arguing that "Business is business […]" (P1–C4), making the case that letting go of a majority of Twitter's seemingly ineffective staff is in fact justified. The overall impression left is one of the user speaking through Musk's interests and Silicon Valley values to an extent where the user

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[54] Throughout this thesis, I will quote the discussed Reddit comments as they have been posted without fixing potential spelling or grammatical errors.

seems to have "naturalized" (ibid. 101) these values as part of their personal worldview – having been subjected to significant socialization by Musk in arriving at this naturalization.

Both comments P1–C4 and P1–C10 seem also indebted to a more widespread neoliberal understanding of what it means to be a good and valuable worker. In both comments, there is an opposition between hardworking individuals and those who do not work hard at all ("untalented leeches" (P1–C10); "coasting along" (P1–C4)). The hardworking individuals are dedicated to their company – and unlike their idle colleagues – help their respective "company turn a profit" (P1–C4) and contribute to "organization outcomes" (P1–C10).

The neoliberal worker is expected by his or her employer to display a "necessary level of willing commitment and subjective investment" (Weeks 2011, 70) in their day-to-day work. The premise underlying this commitment is the neoliberal belief in a "possessive individualism," which mobilises individuals to show initiative and "believe optimistically in the success of their efforts" (Rehmann 2013, 287; see also Hall 1988, 39).[55] With every individual responsible for the shape of his or her future, only great degrees of subjective investment can lead to success in a competitive capitalist economy.

While both comments tout the necessity of the individual worker's dedication to a company's success, comment P1–C10 would seem to augment this neoliberal focus on the individual with added startup-like values. In arguing that Twitter would benefit from a "necessary and dedicated workforce" and a "small group of intelligent, hard working individuals" (P1–C10), the comment makes a jump from pure neoliberal individualism to highlighting the importance of a group dynamic. This emphasis on small and necessary groups of workers recalls the Silicon Valley preference for the dedicated team over valuing the input of the individual worker (Hyrkäs 2016, 122–123; see section 3.4).

Both discussed comments are thus accentuated with elements from Silicon Valley values and rhetoric, while built on a familiar neoliberal basis of the hardworking individual. This neoliberal influence emphasizes a worker's dedication to a company's profit and financial

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[55] Possessive individualism was conceptualized by C.B. Macpherson (1962, 3) who used it to describe the individual in the period of classical liberalism as "essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them." The concept was later used to describe the emerging neoliberal fight for freedom from state interference, paving the way for more economic individualism and harsh competition (Hall 1988, 37).

outcomes, whereas the influence of Silicon Valley discourse veers towards celebrating the potential of the small and dedicated team as well as of the value of "hardcore" work itself.

4.1.2 Work-Death Culture – Ideological Fractioning in Work Conceptions

Some of the replies posted to P1–C4 problematize another key aspect of the Silicon Valley ethic, that is, the presence of a guiding mission in Musk's plans for Twitter. In response to an initial critical reply about Musk's handling of the management transition, the following exchange takes place:

P1–C4–1[56]   0 △ ▽

Its how you filter people out to get work done and are apart of the mission going forward

        P1–C4–2   10 △ ▽

        I think you're vastly overestimating the amount of people who joined twitter "for the mission". The industry is pretty desperate for senior engineers, why stick around pulling suicide hours when you could get an similar or better paid job in a week or two?

        P1–C4–3   10 △ ▽

        There is no 'mission' in this corner of the industry. Just high-skill, in-demand employees who seek a good work/life balance. Nobody is going to go charging up that hill at this stage in a company's lifecycle without the promise of absurd comp.

        Also, there's a huge difference between building a work-death culture in a startup vs trying to re-inject startup culture into a company that has already grown fat and comfortable into midlife.

        P1–C4–4   5 △ ▽

        What even is the "mission" of Twitter anymore? To be a bank? Who's passionate about making a PayPal competitor?

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[56] The third number in the reference code indicates the order of the replies to a specific thread simply as they appear in the present study. P1–C4–1 is in fact a reply to a direct reply received by the initial top comment P1–C4. However, since this initial direct reply is not quoted here, the first numerical order is given to the comment that is quoted. Comments P1–C4–2, –3, and –4 are replies that have been posted in response to P1–C4–1. The nature of a comment being a reply to another is expressed in the formatting by having the reply be indented to the right. Comments P1–C4–2, –3, and –4 are thus not posted in reply to one another – they only reference the comment P1–C4–1 that is quoted first in the group. Additional replies that will be quoted only in footnotes but not discussed further will not be given a separate reference code for the sake of clarity. These replies will rather be identified with brief explanations that account for their relation to the rest of the discussion.

In saying "It's how you filter people out to get work done […]" (P1–C4–1), the first quoted reply references the ultimatum made by Musk to Twitter employees to be "extremely hardcore" or leave the company. The user defends Musk's actions, saying that the ultimatum is given so as to retain the employees at Twitter who will be dedicated to the company's "mission going forward" (P1–C4–1).

The user, however, gets questioned whether a social media company such as Twitter can have a guiding mission and thus whether the startup-like work culture being imposed at the company is justified. The replies P1–C4–2, –3, and –4 make their unified case that employees at Twitter are not there to work for a mission and that they would likely not respond well to the work practices promised by Musk in his memo.

The exchange shows more convincingly that not all users on r/elonmusk are participating in the discussion to simply agree with Musk or to argue the value of his actions. The forum would not appear to be an airtight echo chamber, where opposing and critical views are wholly denied and silenced (see De Francisci Morales et al. 2021). This impression is further underlined by comment P1–C4–1 receiving 0 upvotes in total, whereas the critical replies have been given some light support in the form of approving user votes.[57]

All three critical replies seek to ironize the Silicon Valley practice of working for a mission by referring to the initial commenter's call for one in quotation marks ("'for the mission'" (P1–C4–2), "There is no 'mission'" (P1–C4–3), "What even is the 'mission' of Twitter anymore" (P1–C4–4)). The overall impression of the exchange – when taken together with the distribution of user votes – is that the initial commenter is seen as buying into Musk's values of "hardcore" work too eagerly. The user is questioned for putting too much credence on the value of a motivating mission in Twitter's case and thus by extension too much trust into Musk's handling of the management transition.[58]

The first two critical replies (P1–C4–2 and –3) make an even more direct case against practices associated with the Silicon Valley ethic, particularly in the expectation for

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[57] All Reddit comments are given one automatic upvote at the moment of a user posting their contribution. This means that the comment P1–C4–1 has been given at least one downvote and has potentially received no support from other users visiting the forum.

[58] This impression is further confirmed by some of the initial commenter's replies to the critique which likewise have received downvotes: "Which is who he's filtering out. Hes built a couple billion dollar software companies. I think ill just trust him that he has an idea of what to do" (-1 △ ▽; in reply to P1–C4–2.); "Well. Ill just bet on the guy whose built multiple billion dollar businesses instead of a critic" (-1 △ ▽; in reply to P1–C4–3.)

employees to work extremely long hours. P1–C4–2 refers to the practice as pulling "suicide hours" (P1–C4–2), whereas P1–C4–3 speaks of startup companies routinely establishing a "work-death culture" (P1–C4–3) for themselves. The latter comment makes the further case that workers in the "corner of the industry" (P1–C4–3) where Twitter resides are more so looking for a "good work/life balance" (P1–C4–3), rather than the startup-like culture Musk is in the process of applying.

The language used in the two comments is very pointed, but the question can be asked whether the critique is directed towards the Silicon Valley practices themselves or merely their implementation by Musk at Twitter. The critique of Musk's actions is apparent in the comments, but there seems to be a further opposition between established industry and workers vs. startups and younger, inexperienced workers. P1–C4–2 makes the case that it is senior engineers at Twitter who have no incentive to remain in their jobs, while P1–C4–3 points out the difference between establishing a work-death culture at a startup and trying to "re-inject startup culture into a company" (P1–C4–3) that is otherwise already well established.

I argue that the comments show a kind of ideological fractioning in process, that is, an internal struggle between older and newer conceptions of work. Stuart Hall (1988, 42) showed in his studies of Thatcherism in the United Kingdom how the neoliberal agenda had to actively win its "ascendancy" over traditional conservatism. Doing so was possible by intervening in the terrain of popular common sense and by transforming the direction of "the practical consciousness of the masses" (ibid. 55).

On a much smaller scale, the Silicon Valley ethic is challenging neoliberal ideas about what it means to be a good worker and to be dedicated to one's work. Neoliberalism forms the basis of the startup ethic, but in Musk's and other tech entrepreneurs' manifestations it is augmented by ideas of working in the name of a grand mission and of extending working weeks to 80 hours or more per week (see section 3.3). In this internal ideological struggle between neoliberal and Silicon Valley values, the critical users are pushing back against what Musk and other startup entrepreneurs have promoted, whereas the Silicon Valley variations to work values are more so embraced by the user behind comment P1–C4–1 ("Its how you filter people out to get work done […]").

How much are the critical voices pushing back though? While they seem convinced of the wrongheadedness of Musk's implementation of the ethic at Twitter, it is less clear if they are

arguing against Silicon Valley practices on the whole. According to them, Twitter can not offer an appealing mission – no one is going to "go charging up that hill at this stage in a company's lifecycle" (P1–C4–3). That applies particularly to the company's senior engineers who ought to have more comfortable options available to them in the job market outside of Twitter.

The premise behind this line of argumentation seems to be that the Silicon Valley ethic is, on the whole, more understandable in a startup setting with younger professionals ready to dedicate themselves to their work and the mission being carried out. In their critique of the ethic's implementation, the critical users are thus to an extent solidifying the place and validity of the ethic in Silicon Valley's startup culture. Twitter is the wrong "corner of the industry" (P1–C4–3) for the ethic, but there is application for it in other situations, such as a fledgling tech startup.

The conclusion to be made tentatively is that the ethic has already succeeded in forging a humble place for itself in a common sense conception of work. While it would be hard to argue that the ethic is present in the "practical consciousness of the masses" (Hall 1988, 55) in a widespread sense, the discussed users do seem to take the ethic for granted in a "naturalized" (Hall 2021, 101) sense when it comes to the dominant work culture of many tech startups in general.

The analysis has shown that r/elonmusk can be part of further ideological socialization of the Silicon Valley ethic, particularly when it promotes to top comments views that are in favor of "hardcore" work and the dedication of small teams of hardworking individuals. In the replies analyzed, there are also critical voices present, suggesting a degree of openness to the forum as an online discussion space. The argument that "Twitter Staff Is Lazy and Spoiled" is in these instances problematized by warnings against implementing a "work-death culture" and "suicide hours" at Twitter.

Even in their criticism of Musk's implementation of the Silicon Valley ethic, however, the dissenting commenters end up solidifying the Silicon Valley ethic as acceptable practice for startups and particularly young workers in the industry. Moreover, the critique of Musk's actions being found deep in the discussion means that the critical comments are overall less seen and supported than the top voted "pro-ethic" comments. Further analysis will show how indicative this distribution of support and visibility is of the forum's overall ideological relation to the ethic.

4.2 "Musk's Work Culture Has Worked Before"

4.2.1 Organic Intellectual of the Ruling Class and Cultic Capitalist Practice

P2–C1   93 △ ▽

He's bringing in the work culture that made two other companies succeed that everyone said would fail.

P2–C2   40 △ ▽

He's implementing the culture he already has at 2 of his already successful companies. He wants people who WANT to be there and does not want to waste any time.

And he's giving 3 months salary as severance! There is absolutely NOTHING to feel sorry for here.

The argument that "Musk's Work Culture Has Worked Before" is put forth by two of the highest voted top comments in P2, the above quoted P2–C1 and P2–C2. The argumentation in the two comments is nearly identical: both comments reference Musk's two "already successful companies" (P2–C2) that skeptics of Musk have said "would fail" (P2–C1). According to the users, these two companies – i.e. SpaceX and Tesla – have been successful because of the work culture Musk has implemented in both, leading the users to indirectly predict that Twitter will also be successful once Musk can apply his work practices at the company.

Compared to the previous analysis where some users expressed doubts about the Silicon Valley ethic's applicability to Twitter, the top two comments here seem to unreservedly embrace the Silicon Valley ethic and its values. With trust in the example of SpaceX and Tesla, the users seem to express a rather unwavering belief in Musk's management style and the work culture associated with the ethic overall.

The comments evoke the prominent media discourse about Musk having a "cult-like" following online (*The Verge* 2018, *Vox* 2017; see section 2.2). In an analytical insight that has contributed to ideology-theory, Walter Benjamin (1996, 288) has described capitalism as operating like a "cultic religion" with no specific dogma or theology attached to it. Jan Rehmann has interpreted Benjamin's statements as describing the machine-like functioning of capitalism – where the cultic nature of the system is not driven by a set of ideas, but by an

"ensemble of 'normalizing' practices and rituals" (Rehmann 2013, 41; see also Rehmann 2011, 148).

In a more Gramscian sense, Musk could be described as being a very effective organic intellectual of a ruling capitalist class (cf. discussion of Musk as a capitalist ideologue in section 2.2). Antonio Gramsci (1992, 12) argues that the intellectuals of the group act as "deputies" whose function is to, in part, assure the "'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life." The consent is given in part due to the prestige accorded to the dominant capitalist group in society – which in itself is given due to the prominent positions occupied by said capitalists in the world of production (ibid. 12).

The comments P2–C1 and P2–C2 indicate a level of support and consent for Musk's management practices. Through the example of his companies, Musk has been able to take some of the consent given to the more entrenched neoliberal work ethic (see section 3.3) and shift it towards his own startup-like work practices.

What is in question is not necessarily a general and broad consent of the "great masses." The ideological issue of the work ethic can rather be seen as in some ways internally contested, as Hall (1988, 42) suggested ideologies can be and as indicated by the analysis in the previous section. Musk has participated in this contestation through his consistent media engagement in promotion of Silicon Valley work values (see section 2.2). This promotion can be seen as Musk's way of engaging in an ideological and political struggle to win popular consent for his preferred practices and to apply them further – in the analyzed comments P2–C1 and P2–C2, we can see traces of this consent.

Musk is not the first organic intellectual of the ruling class of exceedingly wealthy capitalists to extend his influence to political activity. Musk's political interests and ventures have received significant levels of credence due to his status as a tremendously successful entrepreneur operating in the United States, much like the ventures of many other businessmen before Musk.[59]

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[59] Inventor and businessman Thomas Edison, for instance, proposed a much-publicized 15-point monetary reform for the United States during a recession in the early 1920s (Hammes & Wills 2006, 295–297). Auto industrialist Henry Ford in turn, at the time "the most trusted public figure in the United States" (Marchand 1998, 207), established multiple so-called village-industries for his employees to live in, in response to the U.S. government's handling of the Great Depression. Ford saw state relief as futile in combatting the economic crisis. (ibid. 207–208.) In recent times, investor Warren Buffett has routinely advised the U.S. government on

In buying Twitter, for instance, Musk has taken upon himself to directly shape American political discourse and its facilitation, as he acts in the name of self-proclaimed "free speech absolutism" (*Time* 2022, *The Guardian* 2022a). So far, Musk's Twitter has however been marked by the reinstallation of previously banned figures of the political far-right in the U.S. (*Business Insider* 2022b) as well as a continuing suppression of prominent journalists and critics of Musk (*CNN* 2022).

Musk's reaction to the on-going climate crisis, in turn, has been to propagate the establishing of a settled human colony on Mars through the efforts of his company SpaceX (*The Independent* 2021, SpaceX 2023). Making humans a "multiplanetary species" (*The Observer* 2018) in this manner is the grand mission of Musk's company, used to both motivate his workers and inspire his followers' further dedication.

It can be debated whether Musk is a cultic figure in the everyday sense of the word, but it would seem that his status as an organic intellectual of the ruling class feeds into Rehmann and Benjamin's understanding of the term. It seems to be an inherent part of the fabric of American capitalism – part of its "ensemble of 'normalizing' practices and rituals" (Rehmann 2013, 41) – to allow for the potential reshaping and reimagining of social life and its hegemonic order by the most successful and wealthy figures in "the world of production" (Gramsci 1992, 12). With his given missions of ensuring free speech and evading effects of climate change, Musk sits neatly into a continuum of organic intellectuals of the ruling class who have in different ways attempted to insert themselves in and influence major political issues of their day.

Such figures are after the type of spontaneous and uncritical consent for their ideological objectives as displayed by the users responsible for the comments P2–C1 and P2–C2. Enamored enough by the success of his businesses to accept his work practices unconditionally, the comments in question work to render Musk a part of a cultic practice of admiring and adhering to the word and political goals of exceedingly high-profile capitalists, even if not an out-and-out cultic figure *per se*.

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economic matters (Hägel 2020, 5; see *CNNMoney* 2008, *The New York Times* 2012). Musk, too, has had access to consulting with high-level politicians (*The Washington Post* 2016, *CNBC* 2017) and, in March 2023, he revealed his plan to build a dedicated town for his factory employees near Austin, Texas, much like Ford did in his time (*Wall Street Journal* 2023).

4.2.2 Benefit of the Few – Extending Presence of Gramscian "Good Sense"

Part of the vertical socializing influence of Musk and the Silicon Valley ethic is in having
individuals embrace practices that would more than likely would be contradictory to their own
social and economic interests (see Hall 1988, 45, 53). The following replies in response to
P2–C2 problematize this phenomenon:

P2–C2–1   8 △ ▽

*Saving the planet via developing the first EVs and exploring space in our life time are things worthy of
dedicating your life to.*

*A social media company is not. These employees will have no life outside of work and they will be
tossed to the curb the first time they cross him. I don't think many companies outside of Tesla and
spacex will be able to pull this off.*

The tides are turning against Elon.

> P2–C2–2   20 △ ▽
>
> *With this logic there could not be any tech startup, right? Because - I do work in a
> tech startup - for sure no one there works 40 hours.*
>
> > P2–C2–3   3 △ ▽
> >
> > *Do you work 12 hours a day 6 days a week 52 weeks a year? Because
> > that's the cadence Elon seems to expect now. That's what his China
> > factory does. After discovering they work that hard he tweeted about
> > his American workers are lazy.*
> >
> > *People working at Twitter are high caliber programmers. I am not
> > sure many of them want to go back to grinding this hard. They can
> > transition to another high paying dev job easily.*
> >
> > *People in start ups are also handsomely rewarded if the company
> > succeeds. I am not sure what upside there is to Twitter considering it
> > was bought for $44B and costs less than $100M to build.*

The debate sees two users arguing whether Twitter employees would be motivated enough to
work hard after Musk applies startup-like conditions at the company. Comment P2–C2–1
argues familiarly that, while Musk's other companies provide missions "worthy of dedicating
your life to" (P2–C2–1), a social media company like Twitter would not be able to do the
same. The user is then questioned by another user who personally identifies with Silicon
Valley work practices, saying that they work for a tech startup and that "for sure no one there

works 40 hours" (P2–C2–2), suggesting the actual working hours in startups are much higher.[60]

The user behind the original P2–C2–1 comment replies back, questioning whether Twitter employees would want to go back to working such hours when they can "transition to another high paying dev job easily" (P2–C2–3). Twitter is not an up-and-coming startup company anymore, which means that the employees will not be as "handsomely rewarded" (P2–C2–3) through equity-based payment and stock options as they would be in a successful startup.

In the previous chapter, we saw that the Silicon Valley ethic and its preferred payment methods benefit mostly those with the highest amounts of shares, often the managers and founders like Musk (see section 3.4). The Silicon Valley ethic working only for the select few can be used to further analyze the exchange discussed here. The dimension of domination present in the ethic is made more clear by looking at the exchange through the lens of the ideology-theoretical concept of good sense.

The notion of "good sense" [from Italian *buon sens*] was originally introduced by Antonio Gramsci as the "healthy nucleus" and oppositional force to common sense – a popular conception of the world sedimented through periods of history and processed by various ideologies (Gramsci 1992, 199, 328; see Rehmann 2013, 128–131). Good sense is characterized by a sense of experimentation and an openness to new experience, whereas common sense is more set in its ways through the weight and pressure of the historical conceptions which constitute it (Rehmann 2013, 131). Good sense is the element in common sense which "deserves to be made more unitary and coherent" (Gramsci 1992, 328), as it is based on direct though limited observation of things as they are (ibid. 348).

I argue that there can be elements of an open "good sense" distinguished in the comments P2–C2–1 and P2–C2–3 – the comments made by the user pushing back against Musk's implementation of the Silicon Valley ethic at Twitter. The first comment points out the lack of a mission Musk has to offer to Twitter employees, an argument that was already made prevalent in analyzed comments in the previous section. The latter comment P2–C2–3 argues

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[60] The user is not the only one to refer to their personal experience and authority about Silicon Valley practices on r/elonmusk: in the analyzed corpus, there are in total 14 users who make claims about working or having worked in the tech industry and/or startup companies, with numerous others claiming familiarity with the industry in other ways. The prevalence of these users acts as a light confirmation that the forum's userbase overlaps with the geek culture that was seen to be dominant on Reddit as a whole (see section 2.1).

that Twitter employees have no financial incentive to stay with the company since they can not be promised the type of big payout expected in an up-and-coming startup.

The comments display distinct elements of "good sense" in Gramsci's (1992, 348) "empirical and limited" way of observing a situation as it is – that is, in looking at Musk's implementation of a startup culture and seeing that the implementation will likely not work as well for an established company such as Twitter. In doing so, the user responsible for the comments is going against the more popular sentiment on the forum of trusting Musk because of his previous business success – i.e. the argument that "Musk's Work Culture Has Worked Before" (see top comments P2–C1 and P2–C2). The latter is more so a "common sense" reaction to the story of Musk's Twitter acquisition, in that it acts as a fortifying ritual of American capitalist practice formed over generations of trusting businessmen such as Musk.

The problem with this instance of "good sense" is that its reach could be extended beyond what the user in question suggests. Its insight could be made more "unitary and coherent" (Gramsci 1992, 328) in an act of rearticulation of an ideological element, as Stuart Hall (1988, 56) puts it.

The previous section saw analysis of the argument that "Twitter Staff Is Lazy and Spoiled," which was countered by some users with reference to "suicide hours" and a "work-death culture" being introduced to Twitter by Musk. In that debate, the questioning of implementing such working hours at Twitter did not extend to actually questioning the value of such work practices in and of themselves.

Similarly, the "good sense" of particularly the comment P2–C2–3 could be extended from criticizing the insufficient payment of workers at Twitter to criticizing the promise of being "handsomely rewarded" (P2–C2–3) in startups in general. Criticizing the domination that is present in Silicon Valley's preferred payment method of equity and stock options (and their relation to expectations of long working hours) is the "healthy nucleus" that the user discovers in their open and experimental questioning. Extending this "good sense" criticism further, the argument that "Musk's Work Culture Has Worked Before" should in this case be rearticulated to ask "For whom has the work culture worked for exactly."

Analyzing the various argumentation put forth on r/elonmusk, I can in this way highlight the "good sense" present in the discussions and orient it towards questioning the Silicon Valley ethic as a whole, as a distinct set of ideological practices and forms of domination. Ideological

struggle in this vein comes in the form of an intervention in an "existing field of practices and institutions" (Hall 2021, 102), as they are used to sustain the dominant discourses present in society. Intervention into the Silicon Valley ethic, as it comes to be promoted on r/elonmusk, is made even more urgent by the presence of people directly affected by it on the forum – as in the case of the self-identified startup worker who posted the comment P2–C2–2. Promoting the ethic and its values on an online forum like r/elonmusk does its part in sustaining the ethic as a set of dominating practices to be applied in actual workplaces and companies.

4.3 "Tech Work Requires Flexibility and Dedication"

4.3.1 Work-Life Balance in Question – Twitter as Musk's Personal Side Project

In the analysis so far, we have been able to see some trends form in the argumentation surrounding Musk and the implementation of the Silicon Valley ethic at Twitter. The discussed top comments have shown success and efficacy in the ideological socialization of the ethic, with users adopting Musk's terminology regarding work and expressing their trust in Musk's ability to apply the ethic at Twitter based on his previous business success.

Users who have been critical of Musk have voiced their doubts about the ethic's suitability to Twitter, particularly in relation to the long working hours requested by Musk as well as the level of compensation expected by workers in the tech industry. These criticisms, while showing a Gramscian streak of open and experimental "good sense," have not however gone as far to criticize the premises of the Silicon Valley ethic itself, choosing instead to direct their doubt at Musk's implementation of it at Twitter.

The final analysis of a recurring, positive argument in favor of Musk – the argument "Tech Work Requires Flexibility and Dedication" – will keep these findings in mind and develop them further. The argument is elaborated in more detail in the following top comments:

P1–C5   46 △ ▽

There seems to be some general view here that knowledge workers are somehow lazy because they go to get coffee or stretch or get lunch. Not all knowledge work requires active coding. Lots of effort goes into thinking about how to solve a particular problem. Once you know how to do something the actual coding isn't that much work. So stretching or getting coffee with a coworker doesn't mean you are not solving problems for the company.

I don't know people who work at twitter, but the people I know working at other tech companies are not just working 8-5 then clocking out. They work more hours than that then go out and learn on their own time new skills related to their work.

I think it's to reorganize the current operations and make them according to Elon Musk. The initial changes in working hours will require challenging work and need to be done on priority, which may not be possible in regular shifts and with a casual working spirit.

The quoted top comments argue that the type of work Musk is asking for from his new employees requires a dedication to work that subverts normal working hours and thus extends to life outside of work too. One of the users makes the claim that workers in the tech industry are in general "not just working 8-5 then clocking out" (P1–C5). The other quoted comment suggests that the workload expected by Musk during the transition of management at Twitter is potentially "not possible in regular shifts" (P1–C9).[61]

Chris Benner has argued that flexible work practices such as these are deeply rooted in Silicon Valley and its famous tech industry. Work in the industry is marked by constantly evolving skill requirements, pressure of continuous learning on the part of workers, as well as high levels of volatility in job security. (Benner 2002, 38–39.)[62] Particularly the comment P1–C5 seems to advocate for this type of flexibility, arguing that tech workers in general cultivate "new skills related to their work" (P1–C5) outside of working hours too.

The comments would seem to argue that Musk is justified in implementing his "hardcore" ethic at Twitter because of the general work requirements and expectations of the tech industry. The industry is fast-moving and always changing (Benner 2002, 47–48; Hyrkäs 2016, 21–22), so the work involved in the management transition needs to be "done on priority" (P1–C9). A mere "casual working spirit" (P1–C9) is not sufficient, but rather the work itself will likely have to extend to the workers learning "on their own time" (P1–C5) since that is standard in the industry.

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[61] As with the user who identified themselves as working in a startup company (P2–C2–2; see section 4.2), the two users discussed here seem to speak from a position of familiarity with the tech industry and its conventions. While this familiarity might not be firsthand, the user responsible for P1–C5 speaks of people in their life who work in the tech industry and who engage in industry practices that dissolve the lines separating work and other spheres of life.

[62] In his book *Work in the New Economy: Flexible Labor Markets in Silicon Valley* (2002), Benner writes about the historical development of Silicon Valley's labor markets since the 1970s to his day. Many of the economic structures of Silicon Valley's tech industry that contribute to great demands of flexibility have been in place since the 1950s, as we have seen (see section 3.4). The demands have arguably only worsened since the time of Benner's study (see Crandall et al. 2021, 848) which is why his insights can still be considered relevant here.

In ideological terms, the comments show themselves to be the result of a successful interpellation of the Silicon Valley ethic's core tenet of flexibility and sacrifice of one's work-life balance. As in the case of the other discussed top comments made in favor Musk, they exhibit a popularity and an acceptance of the ethic that render it overall more visible through the forum of r/elonmusk. In this respect, the forum can be seen as another distinct actor and apparatus in service of the ethic within the contemporary media landscape.

Benner (2002, 83) has tied the requirement of flexibility to the necessity of the tech industry to constantly innovate.[63] The constant quest for innovation is seen in the industry as the very basis of profitability and as an inherent part of the dynamics of competition that are "pushing for flexible work" (ibid. 83). This quest for innovation and new ideas can be seen as operating behind the r/elonmusk calls for tech workers to be constantly "solving problems" (P1–C5) for their company and learning "new skills related to their work" (P1–C5) on their own time.

Marko Ampuja has studied innovation discourse as an ideological phenomenon and has tied it closely to the practices of startup culture. According to Ampuja, in encouraging workers to strive towards innovation, the discourse ends up strengthening the dividing lines between capitalists – those who profit the most from innovation – and the general workforce. Workers remain convinced of their equal opportunity for self-fulfillment and wealth through the power of innovation, while operating in economic conditions where the opportunity for entrepreneurial risk-taking and thus innovation is not equal for all. (Ampuja 2021, 32, 34–35.)

The role of flexibility and its relation to the few who are served by innovation as an ideological value are central to a series of replies posted to the comment P1–C9. In what evolves into a relatively lengthy debate, users discuss the personal relation that Musk himself has to working hard and to the Silicon Valley ethic. The first user makes direct reference to Musk's media presence:

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[63] In an everyday sense, innovation refers to the development of new technologies that would hopefully boost a company's profitability and competitiveness in their respective market. In this ability to drive profits, innovation is generally seen as a value in and of itself. (Ampuja 2021, 14.)

P1–C9–1   3 △ ▽

It'd be easier to take this sort of attitude if it wasn't coming from a guy who spends time doing photo ops with some trolls[64] or incessantly replying to people on social media. He goofs off a ton for someone demanding "hardcore" work.

        P1–C9–2   -1 △ ▽

        I don't agree with the mess you wrote above. Elon lived a life and achieved a lot, proved himself as hardcore worker and a hardcore leader. So, his requirement of employment should be fulfilled accordingly. Also, he is active on Twitter that doesn't mean, he's not active at work. The guy lives in his work and profession.

                P1–C9–3   3 △ ▽

                Yet still has time to tweet about Elden Ring and take photos with a couple of trolls. I think he makes himself look a lot busier than he actually is.

                Or to put it another way, I most likely would be fired if I was constantly tweeting from work like he does.

The user responsible for comments P1–C9–1 and P1–C9–3 is familiar from earlier analyses (see chapter 3). The critical user argues that Musk is indulging in a variety of hobbies and activities, including posting on Twitter and discussing video games online, during working hours as opposed to working "hardcore" himself. The other user counters that Musk has proven himself to be a "hardcore worker and a hardcore leader" (P1–C9–2). For said user, Musk's social media presence does not mean he is not actively working, concluding that Musk "lives in his work and profession" (P1–C9–2).[65]

The exchange evolves into a 20 comment long debate between the first critical user and another user who joins the discussion to argue about Musk's use of time and the effect that has on his companies.[66] The debate culminates in a final questioning by the user who is critical of Musk:

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[64] The mention of "trolls" in the comment refers to a pair of amateur actors who fooled the media into thinking they were Twitter employees fired after Musk's takeover. Musk later posed with the actors and hired one of them to work at Twitter. (*Business Insider* 2022e.)

[65] The comment is yet another instance of a user adopting Musk's language of being "hardcore" and directly speaking through the ideological premises of the Silicon Valley ethic (see section 4.1).

[66] The comment thread being so long, a visitor to the forum has to click on a "Continue this thread" hyperlink twice to access all the replies. The hyperlink takes the user away from the main body of the discussion to display only the debate between the two users.

P1–C9–4   1 △ ▽

Do you think it's good for long-term company health that the CEO has essentially checked out for an extended period of time?

        P1–C9–5   2 △ ▽

        as a board director? as I said in my response, if he's meeting his obligations I do not care.

        as an individual? I'm more worried about his mental health, and as a believer of his core tenant that humanity needs to become a multi-planet species, I'd much rather him focusing his efforts at space x.

        but, for all I know, all the major projects he has going on maybe in a state where he can't contribute in his roles. as a manager, there's times when you just need to let your team do the work without getting in the way.

The critical user posting the replies P1–C9–1, –3, and –4 argues that Musk is not doing that much work personally, that Musk has "essentially checked out" (P1–C9–4) with Twitter in a way that could potentially hurt his other companies, SpaceX and Tesla. In the middle of the debate, the user even refers to Twitter as Musk's "personal side project" that is taking up too much of his time.[67] On the other side of the debate, the user who defends Musk says they would not be worried about Musk's allocation of time in a business sense, as long as he is "meeting his obligations" (P1–C9–5) in service of the other companies.

The critical comments display the same type of questioning "good sense" as seen in previous analyses. Musk's function as an organic intellectual of a ruling capitalist class gets challenged as the comment P1–C9–1 points out that he "goofs off a ton for someone demanding 'hardcore' work" (P1–C9–1). The user suggests Musk "makes himself look a lot busier than he actually is" (P1–C9–3), while spreading the word of a work ethic he himself does not adhere to as strictly. The critique closes in on the notion that the Silicon Valley mode of working serves more the people in charge of tech companies than the workers who live its demands on a daily basis (see Crandall et al. 2021, 847–848; Ampuja 2021, 34–35).

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[67] "[I]f I were on the Tesla board, I'd be concerned why our leader is spending so much of his working time on a personal side project." (2 △ ▽). Due to the length of the debate, not all relevant comments can be quoted in full. Certain parts of the comments will instead be quoted in the footnotes to give a fuller picture of the debate and the stances therein.

The user's critique, however, evolves into looking at Silicon Valley practices more from a point of view of their effect on Musk's companies and other business ventures. Instead of considering the level of ideological domination involved in demanding flexibility and sacrifice of free time from workers, the user considers whether Musk's new dedication to Twitter is at the expense of his dedication to Tesla and SpaceX (see P1–C9–4). In the user's words, Musk has made claims of "living and sleeping" at Twitter's headquarters which should cause concern for those overseeing the operation of Musk's other companies.[68] The same user thus starts the debate by arguing that Musk is not really working hard at all and ends it for their part by suggesting that Musk is dedicated to Twitter to a harmful degree.

Contradictory argumentation aside, the user displays Gramscian "good sense" in being open to the idea of how utmost flexibility with one's free time and the level of dedication to work displayed by Musk can negatively affect other pursuits in life. The case made by the user, however, is concern for the effect on other business ventures, as opposed to concern for work-life balance or the health of the individual applying themselves so totally.[69]

As seen in prior analyses, the critical voices on r/elonmusk tend to be critical of Musk and his actions while not extending that criticism to the central practices of the Silicon Valley ethic altogether. The same occurs here when the critical user in question wonders initially whether Musk's "hardcore" ethic applies only to his workers and not Musk himself (see P1–C9–1 and P1–C9–3). From there, however, the user gets sucked into debating the role of flexibility in Musk's personal life, as opposed to further questioning it as a form of ideologically dominating workers.

The debate obfuscates the lines between what is work and what is a "personal side project" for Musk enough that, by the end, even the critical user is more or less operating under the premise that Musk "lives in his work and profession" (P1–C9–2). In trying to answer why the user in question slides back into a less pointed criticism, we can turn again towards the relation that innovation has to capitalist practice and ideology.

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[68] "So you're saying that if you were on the board and you were paying your company's leader 10s of billions of dollars a year (which is frankly an obscene amount of money for anyone to make), you'd be completely fine with the buying another company, spending huge amounts of time at that company, and even going so far as to announce that he will be living and sleeping at that other company's HQ for the foreseeable future?" (2 △ ▽)

[69] The effect on health of a Silicon Valley level of work dedication gets interestingly questioned by the user supporting Musk who is "worried about [Musk's] mental health" (P1–C9–5). Such parasocial concern shown to Musk by his followers would be a very interesting topic of research on its own.

4.3.2 Innovation as Objective Thought Form

As discussed earlier, the practice of flexibility in the Silicon Valley ethic has its roots in industrial needs for innovation and thus the boosting of profitability (Benner 2002, 83). Ampuja (2021, 27) has argued that innovation is so integral to the functioning of capitalism in general that it constitutes what is known in ideology-theoretical terms as an objective thought form.

An objective thought form was coined by Karl Marx (1976, 682) as a "current and usual mode of thought" that is reproduced spontaneously and without active intervention in society. It is a form of common practice and consciousness (Rehmann 2013, 43), that guides individuals in their daily life as they navigate an environment marked by a capitalist mode of production (Ampuja 2021, 27). In Marx's (1976, 899) terms, these kinds of thought forms can be seen as imposing a "silent compulsion of economic relations," as the requirements of the dominant mode of production come to be seen as more or less undeniable natural laws.

Projekt Ideologie-Theorie has suggested that objective thought forms could be seen as the "basis of the integrative power of bourgeois ideologies" (Rehmann 2013, 50), without being ideologies themselves (see Haug 1987, 68). Objective thought forms such as commodity-fetishism[70] and the wage-form[71] constitute basic ways of living that guide people in their day-to-day activities, without being continuously reinforced by the influence of ideological apparatuses or ideologues. In being so entrenched in everyday life and experience, objective thought forms end up hiding the historically defined nature of the practices involved in them – in this, they approach the popular reach of Gramsci's notion of common sense and can be seen as constituting a part of it (Kyyrönen 2020, 70, 123).

I argue that it is the gravitational pull of innovation as an entrenched objective thought form that swerves the long debate on r/elonmusk to its later tracks. The critical user starts to

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[70] The phenomenon of commodity-fetishism sees the producers, i.e. the workers, being "ruled by the 'things' they produce" (Rehmann 2013, 39). In other words, the relationship of domination between workers and capitalists is substituted in common practice and thought as being instead a relationship between "things" in a capitalist market (Ampuja 2021, 27).

[71] The wage-form refers to the wage of the worker seemingly accounting for all labor rendered – the entire working day – when in reality it only encompasses the labor necessary for the worker to reproduce his or her labor-power. The wage then does not cover the surplus-labor, from which the capitalist sources surplus-value for themselves. (Rehmann 2013, 44.) In Marx's words (1976, 680), the wage-form extinguishes "the division of the working day into necessary labour and surplus labour, into paid labour and unpaid labour." The wage-form will be discussed in more detail with regard to the r/elonmusk discussions in section 5.3.

wonder how Musk's new dedication to Twitter can hurt the business of his other companies from the point of view of a hypothetical board member ("Do you think it's good for long-term company health that the CEO has essentially checked out for an extended period of time?" (P1–C9–4)).

The question in other terms is whether Musk is endangering the profitability of his companies as he is not as committed in his use of time to further business and thus innovation at these other companies. To quote one of the initial top comments that make the argument that "Tech Work Requires Flexibility and Dedication," Musk does not seem to be "solving problems" or learning new skills "on [his] own time" (P1–C5) to help these other companies. The unspoken premise of the later long debate is that if the dedication and flexibility of a given worker (or a CEO, in this case) is not adequately geared towards the value of innovation and constantly solving problems, the company will suffer

The potential ideological struggle in the debate about flexibility and its effect on workers becomes instead an affirmation of that very flexibility, as it serves to help companies flourish through the value of innovation. There are the seeds of ideological contestation in the initial replies of the critical user (e.g. "He goofs off a ton for someone demanding 'hardcore' work" (P1–C9–1)), but the discussion shows that this type of contestation can be defused in ways other than direct intervention from various apparatuses and ideologues. In this case, the discussion is derailed by the entrenched influence of innovation as an objective thought form which shapes the critical user's common sense processing of day-to-day capitalist practice and thus Musk's acquisition of Twitter.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

On a final note about the discussion trends present on r/elonmusk, the analysis has shown again that there is undeniable popularity for the practices associated with the Silicon Valley ethic, as shown by the top comments arguing that "Tech Work Requires Flexibility and Dedication" (see P1–C5 and P1–C9). Like in the previous two sections, the overall sentiment on the forum based on the most upvoted comments would seem to be one of supporting Musk's takeover of Twitter and of embracing the Silicon Valley way of working in general.

Users who are critical of Musk have been present throughout the replies, but the criticism has mostly been directed at Musk's implementation of the Silicon Valley ethic at Twitter, as opposed to the work practices in and of themselves. Idolation of Musk and strict adherence to

his opinion has been downvoted at times in the discussions (e.g. "The guy lives in his work and profession" (P1–C9–2; -1 △ ▽)). The vast and unruly nature of Reddit means, however, that the critical voices and critical reactions in the form of downvotes also get buried deep in the conversation. Compared to the top comments, these critical expressions have much less visibility for the userbase of the forum and thus less ideological pull.

With the criticism often halting before questioning the Silicon Valley ethic itself, it can be argued that the forum is already quite ideologically steeped in and interpellated by the ethic and its values. As a space for online discussion, r/elonmusk would not seem to be fully echo-chamberized in adhering to Musk's word and opinion, but it does display considerable attachment to both Musk and the Silicon Valley ethic's key work practices. In this attachment, the forum can participate in promoting and socializing people visiting the forum into further embracing the Silicon Valley ethic as an accepted set of work practices.

All of the above findings will be problematized further in the following chapter, where the analysis takes as its starting point some of the prominent negative arguments and critiques made on the forum about Musk's acquisition of Twitter.

5   Not Some Elon Hater: Arguments Against Musk and the Ethic

In this chapter, I will take a look at the prominent negative arguments made on r/elonmusk that in some way speak against Musk's implementation of the Silicon Valley ethic at Twitter. The three most prominent arguments in the analyzed top comments are: 1) "Transition of Twitter's Work Culture Is Too Chaotic," 2) "Musk Has No Vision for Twitter or Appealing Mission for Its Employees", and 3) "Work Environment in Musk's Companies Is Toxic."

A majority of the analyzed comments in support of these arguments come from P3, the r/elonmusk post made after Twitter employees had reacted to Musk's "hardcore" memo and ultimatum to leave the company. Most of the top comments made in the post had a reaction that was in some way negative to Musk's implementation of new work practices at Twitter. Out of the 10 top comments analyzed, 9 were deemed to be generally unfavorable to Musk and his actions, whereas the remaining posts P1 and P2 saw a more even distribution of positive and negative comments.

To observe such a shift in the surface sentiment of r/elonmusk users is, however, not enough. The users' specific argumentation and its various ideological dimensions need to be considered more in-depth to understand the forum better as a discussion space. What are the negative reactions like, how do they present their critique, and how do they overall contribute to the potential ideological functioning of the forum in service of the Silicon Valley ethic? These questions will be in focus in the following three sections.

5.1   "Transition of Twitter's Work Culture Is Too Chaotic"

5.1.1   Carnevalist Fun – Reddit and Musk's Joint Interpellation to Joke Around

P3–C1   150 △ ▽

He fired the people who would revoke others' access

attached meme of actor Leonardo DiCaprio laughing[72]

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[72] The original comment includes a popular meme of actor Leonardo DiCaprio laughing derisively in Quentin Tarantino's film *Django Unchained* (2012). The embedded image can not be included here due to licensing issues. For the original r/elonmusk comment including the meme in question, see Reddit 2023a.

P3–C3   75 △ ▽

That's a lot of 3 months severance to pay out at once!

The most upvoted comment and the third most upvoted comment in P3, as quoted above, contribute to the argument that "Twitter's Work Culture Transition Is Too Chaotic." P3 was posted on r/elonmusk two days after the initial posts regarding Musk's internal memo and ultimatum to Twitter employees. The post's title makes reference to 75% of the remaining employees quitting in response to Musk's demands, while still having access to their work systems even with the deadline for the ultimatum having passed.[73]

The comment P3–C1 makes the case that Musk has – in his attempt to pare down Twitter's workforce to a small, dedicated team – lost valuable workers and thus made the carrying out of the company's operations harder. Even though a large number of employees have resigned, they still have access to their systems because Musk "fired the people who would revoke others' access" (P3–C1). The comment P3–C3 argues in turn that the transition of company culture is chaotic because it will be costly in terms of severance pay to let go of so many employees at once.

What is striking about the two comments is their lighthearted, joke-y attitude towards the news coming from Twitter's offices. Most distinctly and evidently, the top comment P3–C1 attaches to it a popular meme of actor Leonardo DiCaprio, seen laughing mockingly in Quentin Tarantino's film *Django Unchained* (2012) (see P3–C1).[74] The use of the meme makes Musk a subject of ridicule, a highly successful businessman who has critically impaired the functioning of his newly-bought company through his own poor management decisions. With its use of an emphasizing exclamation mark, even the comment P3–C3 has a

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[73] The title is a direct quotation of a tweet by *Fortune* magazine journalist Kylie Robison: "What I'm hearing from Twitter employees; It looks like roughly 75% of the remaining 3,700ish Twitter employees have not opted to stay after the "hardcore" email. Even though the deadline has passed, everyone still has access to their systems." (Internet Archive 2023)

[74] Use of embedded images and memes in Reddit comments is a relatively new phenomenon. It has been possible for users to start a post by sharing an image or meme for most of the time Reddit has been active. However, the platform enabled the embedding of images in comment sections more widely in November 2022 (Reddit 2022), the same month when the posts analyzed in the present study were posted. The platform as a whole can thus be seen as still coming to terms with what role images play in the wider discussion etiquette and dynamic of its various forums.

somewhat teasing quality in its attitude to Musk letting most of his new company's workforce go in one swoop.[75]

The comments can be further explicated in ideology-theoretical terms by looking at how Jan Rehmann and other proponents of Projekt Ideologie-Theorie have described a *carnivalesque* event. Based on his reading of literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on the notion of carnival, Rehmann (2013, 249) describes such an event as eliciting "festive laughter" as hierarchical rank and structures are momentarily suspended. Otto Kyyrönen (2020, 112) expresses this suspension of hierarchy succinctly in writing that during such moments of carnival the "low are elevated; and the high are degraded."

In this momentary overturning of hierarchies, the carnivalesque moment can be seen as having anti-ideological impulses. Rehmann makes the further case, however, that the carnival is in fact a "*controlled* reversal of hierarchies" (Rehmann 2013, 249; original emphasis). To explain this notion better, I will turn here to Projekt Ideologie-Theorie's understanding of alienated community and its relation to ideology.

Alienated community is partly how the vertical socialization of the ideological powers – to which Musk and Reddit belong as ideological actors (see section 3.2) – operates in society. In upholding hierarchical structures of domination through socialization, the ideological powers serve to reproduce an "antagonistic social order" (Haug 1983, 12) that is in itself originally based on the division of labor in society and its related class struggle.

The antagonistic order is upheld, in part, by detaching social and political questions from society and practical life and thus making them the purview of the ideological powers. In generalizing and detaching issues like labor rights from everyday life, the ideological powers

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[75] The comment P3–C1 that includes the meme of Leonardo DiCaprio could arguably be classified as a joke, but in the initial analysis I classified it rather as making an argument against the implementation of the Silicon Valley ethic at Twitter. The comments that were classified in the "Joke Response" category more often than not included media and pop culture references, but they also did not express a clear line of argumentation with regard to Musk's Twitter acquisition. The joke comments showed themselves to be more ambivalent and non-engaging instead in relation to the shakeup in Twitter's work culture. The comment P3–C1, while striving to make users laugh at Musk's expense, does express a criticism of Musk's application of his "hardcore" demands on Twitter employees – that is, the demands are resulting in the company's everyday functions being unsteady and unreliable. The comment's ambiguous status serves to underline the variety of register and mode of expression that is at play on r/elonmusk and Reddit as a whole (see section 2.1). This mixing of modes is why an in-depth qualitative analysis is necessary to get a better picture of the forum as a discussion environment and thus as a potential ideological apparatus of the Silicon Valley ethic (cf. section 3.1 and the discussion of big data analysis in media studies).

create a sense of community that is alienated from practical social concerns and that works in favor of the antagonistic upheld order. (Kyyrönen 2020, 83; see Haug 1983, 13.)

In their carnivalesque fun, the comments P3–C1 and P3–C3 present a seemingly anti-ideological moment of overturning hierarchies – that is, of horizontal socialization and consensus among r/elonmusk users against Musk's status and authority. As noted by Rehmann (2013, 249), however, the Bakhtian notion of carnival is a "*controlled* reversal of hierarchies": this means that the anti-ideological impulse occurs within the confines of the antagonistic order and structures of domination that are being maintained by the ideological powers.

I argue that the seemingly horizontal moment of carnival fun is in fact built on ideological influence of alienating r/elonmusk as a forum and online space from discussing the practical concerns involved with Musk's work practices. This alienation is accomplished by a type of joint interpellation by both Reddit and Musk as ideological actors to generally joke around online that, in this case, extends to making fun of Musk's handling of the Twitter acquisition and management transition. Both Reddit and Musk – through their overall discussion culture and consistent online presence, respectively – call on people who are active online to bond in different ways and to form a distinct sense of community through a shared comedic sensibility and taste. This sense of community is the controlled ideological setting and space within which the users go on sharing memes and jokes.

A brand of masculine and geek-y humor has been described as the lingua franca of Reddit's most populated forums. Adrienne L. Massanari (2019, 20) has described the Reddit brand of humor as stemming from the platform's dominant culture which reflects values of "young, White, heterosexual, middle class, cis-males, who are technologically savvy/STEM-oriented[76], and libertarian-minded." The sharing of jokes and memes on Reddit can be seen as a form of "cultural currency" (ibid. 20), which in itself has contributed to a sense of bonding and growth in userbase particularly on Reddit's more right-wing communities (Roozenbek & Salvador Palau 2017, 204; Rieger et al. 2021, 2).

An active user on Reddit will most likely be in some way affected and called upon by this culture of joking around on the platform, much like those following Musk's online presence

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[76] The acronym STEM refers to the professional and educational fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

will very likely be confronted by his noted sense of humor (see section 2.2). Musk has a habit of reposting memes he finds on his personal Twitter account, to the extent that his tendency of reposting content without accreditation is something of an online meme in itself (see *The New York Times* 2021a). Musk has also shown his awareness of meme culture and the irony involved in his style of posting content online by tweeting: "Who controls the memes, controls the Universe" (Musk 2020c).

N.V. Davydovska (2021, 19) has recognized irony as one of the main modes of expression in Musk's tweets, a sense of satirical play which Musk turns on himself often too.[77] According to Davydovska, Musk tries to build attachment and feelings of community with his followers through the memes and joke-y content he shares on Twitter. In this online activity, Musk strives to participate in "geek and meme communities" (ibid. 20) and make himself more approachable to the younger generations of people following and admiring him online.

Both followers of Musk and active users of Reddit are thus called upon to create a sense of community based on a shared language of memes and jokes, marked by a distinct geek-y sensibility. Users who frequent r/elonmusk are in this sense called on jointly by both to engage in the sharing and posting of memes that exhibit a basis of intersecting and mutually supportive values.

It is here that we can see that the moment of carnival fun of P3–C1 and P3–C3 is indeed controlled. The comments' way of teasing Musk is not a horizontal moment of consensual community that is created through resisting Musk's status and rank in a hierarchical society. The anti-ideological impulse of the comments is in fact exactly what the practices and culture of discussion of r/elonmusk would likely prime the users do, as the forum exists in the nexus of both Musk and Reddit's ideological interpellations to share jokes.

In other words, the users are socialized vertically to ironize and make fun of Musk's setbacks and thus create a sense of alienated community. The alienation in question draws the users away from discussing the values of Musk's implemented work culture and the Silicon Valley ethic more directly.

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[77] Musk has, for instance, posted memes about his own Twitter purchase and the legal troubles therein (Musk 2022n) and jokes about the birth of his 9th and 10th child as a way of combatting an "underpopulation crisis" which is the "biggest danger civilization faces by far" (Musk 2022o). He has also commented on the quirkiness and oddness often tied to his media personality in tweeting: "The rumor that I'm building a spaceship to get back to my home planet Mars is totally untrue" (Musk 2015).

We can compare the ideological effect to what Christian Fuchs and Nick Couldry put forward in their idealist conception of ideology on social media (see section 3.1). Instead of an illusion of participation, the users on r/elonmusk are called by both Musk and Reddit to engage discussion of Musk's work practices in a decidedly lighthearted way. The users are not ideologically misled into believing that they are participating in impactful political debate, but rather the political debate itself is made to seem inconsequential and not worthy of engaging sincerely. This shift in the register of discussion and in the users' degree of engagement is in itself an impactful result and a sign of effective ideological influencing on the part of Musk and Reddit.

Kyyrönen (2020, 112) writes that when the carnivalesque moment of fun is over, the hierarchical structures of a class society are reinstated and those partaking in the moment can "feel a little better about life" under such structures afterwards. In the present case too, the users briefly lower Musk's authority by mocking the chaotic management of the Twitter transition, only to have it strengthen Musk's social position as a billionaire who is trying to bring himself "closer to common people" (Davydovska 2021, 17) and extend his ideological influence in the media overall.

5.1.2 Alienated Community and Domination Through Memes

The sense of community created through vertical socialization is strong on the forum which can be seen by the reaction to a reply received by P3–C1:

P3–C1–1   -34 △ ▽

A lot of people that worked for twitter before the take over admired him because of the business brain he has. Now he takes over twitter and does buy the company and past followers and admirers become haters. He is sorry you lost your job but its business nothing personal and a sign of the times. Get of him get unemployment then find something better. Its business. And a lot of states can fire at will no explanation. Leave Elon alone . #just business sorry it disrupted your life.

The comment P3–C1–1, quoted above, is the most downvoted comment by a wide margin across the three posts being analyzed. In the comment, the user argues that Twitter employees who used to revere Musk have now turned against him after his acquisition of the company.

The comment is likely downvoted so much because it is so openly laudatory of Musk and because, in that admiration, the user in question breaks the carnivalesque moment instigated by the top comments. The comment's earnestness breaks the sense of festive community

being established by not participating in the ideologically encouraged act of making fun of Musk. The negative reaction to the comment could also be partly due to its relatively insensitive argumentation about the Twitter employees' situations as well as its poorly written nature and numerous grammatical mistakes.

Replies in other discussions have been similarly downvoted when they express an unquestioning admiration for Musk. It is important, however, to note that there is also open admiration for Musk on the forum and that comments expressing this admiration are also routinely voted as some of the most upvoted comments in the analyzed posts. The community's approval for praising Musk would seem to be quite dependent on the context and tone of the given discussion at hand. The disapproval of the comment P3–C3–1 seems to stem from the user going against the communal sentiment and desire to make fun of Musk's recklessness in scaling down Twitter's workforce.

As seen earlier, the act of joking around about Musk's actions alienates the users from discussing the Silicon Valley ethic and its practices more thoroughly and intently. The ethic's general value is debated elsewhere along the course of P3, as we will see in the following analyses. The fact that some of the most upvoted comments of the post (no. 1 and 3, respectively) choose foremost to engage in light teasing, however, is telling of the level of alienation present on the forum and the success of the joint interpellation by Musk and Reddit to have the users connect over common geek-y values and comedic sensibility.

Drawing on Marx's well-known critique of religion, Rehmann suggests that ideology functions both as an "opium of the people" as well as a "sigh of the oppressed creature" (Rehmann 2013, 27; see Marx 1970, 131). In the former sense, ideology can be seen as both pacifying and paralyzing its subjects, whereas in the latter it can function as an activating influence on those living in and through it. Ideology being a field of contradictory dynamics like this, it becomes the task of critical analysis to nurture the activated "sigh" of the subject recognizing their oppression and to encourage it to overcome its trappings of a dominated existence. (Rehmann 2013, 27; Kyyrönen 2020, 27.)

The analysis of the comments in P3 has so far emphasized the pacifying effects of a community partially built on being able to make fun of Musk and sharing jokes, but the forum's potential for activation remains less clear. Comparable to Gramsci's (1992, 328) "good sense," or in other words the "healthy nucleus" of common sense, the "sigh" of the r/elonmusk user could be seen as rejection of Musk's complete authority on matters of

business and thus as an organic intellectual of the ruling capitalist class. Then again, the users are also interpellated by Musk and his social media activity to make the rejection and to satirize him as an admired public figure.

A way of nurturing the "sigh" within the ideological compliance of the users would be to draw attention to how Musk has used his status as a geek-y sharer of online memes as a way to distract from his various political, social, and business troubles. Musk inclination to joke around online seems at times to form a pattern of downplaying and diverting attention away from news stories that cast him in a negative light.[78] This is not to suggest that users of r/elonmusk ought to refrain from the sharing of memes and jokes themselves, but rather encourage thought as to why Musk might want his followers to be socialized into such practice. The person who controls the sharing of memes might not control the "universe" (see Musk 2020c), but there can definitely be trace elements of domination found in exploring to whose benefit and to whose disservice jokes are being made.

The analysis of this section complicates the notion of r/elonmusk as a potential echo chamber of Musk followers. Criticism of Musk has been evident in previous analyses, but in the top comments of P3, the criticism is ideologically welcomed by Musk's media personality. We have seen that criticism can in fact strengthen the bond and sense of community that Musk's followers feel to share with Musk. The presence of criticism should thus not by taken at face value as indication that an online space does not operate in the manner of an insulated echo chamber. In this case, the criticism expressed by the users about Twitter's management acts as further evidence that r/elonmusk might be echo chamberized to some degree around Musk's celebrity and influence.

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[78] Musk has, for instance, reacted to a publicized claim of sexual harassment by titling the news story "Elongate," a pun and sexual innuendo based on the American political scandal Watergate (Musk 2022m; see section 2.2). When Musk was settling a fraud lawsuit with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), he sarcastically referred to the agency as "Shortseller Enrichment Commission" in a tweet, a simultaneous insult at the SEC and at investors who are betting against the success of Musk's company Tesla (Musk 2018; see *CNBC* 2018b). Finally, when Twitter was forcing Musk to go through with the purchase of the social media company through legal means, Musk tweeted a photo of actor Chuck Norris in front of a chessboard in reaction. With the implication that he had legally outmaneuvered Twitter, Musk captioned the photo with the pun "Chuckmate" (Musk 2022p; see *CNN* 2022d).

5.2   "Musk Has No Vision for Twitter or Appealing Mission for Its Employees"

5.2.1 No Toxicity – Harsh Moderation and the Encoded Message

While the previously analyzed comments lose the thread on discussing the Silicon Valley ethic and its practices in a fleeting moment of carnival fun, the comments arguing that "Musk Has No Vision for Twitter or Appealing Mission for Its Employees" return to one of the ethic's core tenets:

P3–C4   26 △ ▽

Is this part of the 4D intergalactic hyperchess that is all part of the master plan for Musk to rebuild Twitter into his grand vision?

Edit: I got banned for this comment. So much for free speech, right folks?

P3–C5   23 △ ▽

Who could have guessed that demanding crunch and grueling hours for a social media platform with less than 24 hour notice is gonna make people laugh, grab 3 months of severance and leave for better jobs.

The comment P3–C4 asks sarcastically whether Musk's "master plan" and "grand vision" (P3–C4) for Twitter include the resignation of 75% of the remaining workforce, in a reference to the Silicon Valley ethic's key tenet of a guiding mission. The comment P3–C5, in turn, argues that Musk's demands for a work culture with grueling hours are baseless, since Twitter is a mere "social media platform" (P3–C5). The implication is that Musk would not be able to motivate his new employees to work as hard as he wants, since Twitter can not offer as attractive a mission as one of Musk's other companies.

In a familiar argumentative move, the latter user seems to think that it is mostly the implementation of a Silicon Valley set of values at Twitter that will not work out for Musk. The former user, however, would seem to be more so criticizing the notion of having a "grand vision" (P3–C4) and thus the Silicon Valley approach to work altogether. While the top comments in the previous section approached Musk softly in their critique in the form of carnivalesque teasing, here there is unambiguous critique of Musk and the ethic that gets a relatively good reception on the forum in terms of upvotes – 26 for the user criticizing Musk's "vision" and 23 for the user critical of Musk's demands of grueling working hours at Twitter.

The critique, however, is also the apparent target of suppressive measures by the r/elonmusk moderation team. The user who posted the comment P3–C4 has edited their comment after posting it with the text: "I got banned for this comment. So much for free speech, right folks?" (P3–C4). The user's claim is that they have been banned from the r/elonmusk forum specifically, as opposed to Reddit as a whole.

Each Reddit forum has its own set of moderators who are often either users who have founded the forum in question or users active in the specific forum and community who have been asked to perform moderation duties (Squirrell 2019, 1913; see section 2.1). The day-to-day moderation on Reddit is thus volunteer-based and community-driven. Moderators on Reddit have the ability to remove posts and comments as well as ban users from their specific communities, as they apply forum-specific rules of posting and behavior. (Tchach et al. 2022, 5.)

Of the 5 listed rules for r/elonmusk, only rule number 1 – "No toxicity" – is potentially applicable as a reason for the banning of the user responsible for the comment P3–C4.[79] The elaboration of the rule reads as follows: "Similar to the company-wide policy at SpaceX, we have a no-assholery rule. This also means no rabble rousing" (Reddit 2023c). There is no specification by the moderation team as to the reason of the banning.[80]

In ideological terms, the banning shows that there are distinct vertical structures of domination present within the forum itself. This act of vertical domination[81] raises questions about the forum's openness to hosting critical users and thus its potential functioning as an echo chamber dedicated to followers and admirers of Musk. The banning also complicates the

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[79] The rules are, in order: 1) *No toxicity*, 2) *Relevant content only* (i.e. content posted has to be relevant to Musk's life and/or his companies), 3) *No editorialization* (meaning the users can not change titles of news stories as they post them), 4) *No reposts* (i.e. posting the same content in a short time period is not allowed), and 5) *Tweets/Twitter* (meaning that the users must post a direct link to a tweet if they wish to discuss a tweet; a screenshot or a photo of a tweet will be removed). (Reddit 2023c.)

[80] Moderators can leave comments in Reddit discussions explaining their decisions and evoking specific rules. There are five comments made by moderators doing this across the three discussed posts (P1, P2, and P3), but no explanatory comment is left for the user responsible for the comment P3–C4. There are altogether 7 moderators on r/elonmusk as well as 3 automated bots which handle moderating duties as well (Reddit 2023c).

[81] The banning is in effect an act of repression by the moderation team against the user. While ideology-theoretical formulations have at times delineated acts of ideological domination from more direct repression (see Rehmann 2013, 152–153; Poulantzas 1978, 33), the ability to ban and repress critical voices can here be seen as a distinct part of the ideological functioning of the forum and its moderation team.

forum's status as a potential ideological apparatus in service of the Silicon Valley ethic. These questions and topics will be in focus in the present section.

To explore these issues, I will turn to a separate r/elonmusk post made by a moderator on behalf the forum's moderation team on either January 24th or 25th, 2023. The post, titled "There Will Be No Liberty on Board This Ship Until Morale Improves" and published when I was in the middle of pursuing this analysis, was briefly pinned[82] to the top of the forum for its userbase to see, but has since been deleted. The post deals with changes the moderation team has perceived on the forum and in its discussion culture since Musk's acquisition of Twitter in November 2022.
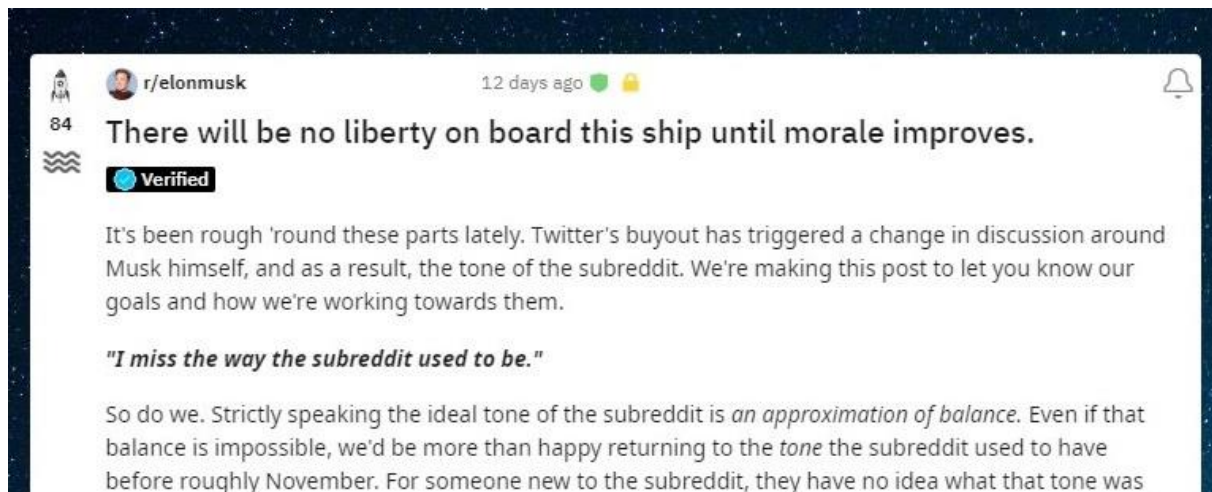
Figure 4 Screenshot of the beginning of the pinned post by the moderation team, captured by myself on February 6th, 2023. I have removed the username of the moderator who made the post from the image to better ensure the anonymity of the user in question.

The post can give us insight as to why the user responsible for the comment P3–C4 was potentially banned. The moderator who made the post laments the forum's change in tone to more negative that has taken place since Musk acquired Twitter which brought, as the moderator puts it, an "influx of guests" to the forum. The post explains that the moderation team has since engaged in more aggressive moderation on the forum to curb what the moderator calls "bad actors." In the post, the moderator recognizes that there has been an

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[82] Moderators on Reddit can pin posts that will remain at the top of the forum's list of discussions. A post can be pinned for as long as the given moderation team chooses. Pinned posts often feature important information about the forum itself, be it directed at new users or subscribed regular visitors. Such posts can also be used to contain discussion into a single post in order to avoid the creation of multiple posts about the same topic.

increase in "low effort anti-Musk sentiment" as well as new users whose post histories show frequent use of anti-Musk forums.[83]

The moderator goes on to argue that the moderation team has so far failed in its task to change the forum's tone back to what it was. It is very likely that the user responsible for the comment P3–C4 was a target of this more aggressive brand of moderation on the forum.

The moderator's post and the banning of the user display most clearly so far the internal structures of hierarchy in place on r/elonmusk. This harsher line of moderation, in turn, has bearing on how we should treat the forum's potential functioning as an ideological apparatus in service of the Silicon Valley ethic. We have seen that the content of the forum – that is, the posts and the discussions that are being analysed – are formed in part by the influence of Reddit and Musk as material ideological actors (see sections 3.2 and 5.1).[84] The display of moderation on the forum and its goals to reduce negativity show that the moderation team constitutes another material actor that can shape what types of discussions are had on r/elonmusk and what type of content is overall seen as desirable and welcome on the forum.

The moderator expresses in the pinned post that the moderation team wants debate on the forum and even explicit critique of Musk. In addressing users who would want to come to the forum to criticize Musk, the moderator writes: "Please do! With our solicitation and blessings! We *want* you to hold him accountable […]" (original emphasis).

What the moderator does not want to see on the forum is users doing a "4chan-tier driveby smearing"[85] or coming in to say "heinous shit about Musk." They also outline specific topics

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[83] Alongside r/elonmusk, Reddit hosts the forums r/EnoughMuskSpam and r/fuckelomusk where users are encouraged to criticize and make fun of both Musk and his admirers (see Reddit 2023i, Reddit 2023j).

[84] The analysis could also extend to consideration of the material influence of the news organizations whose reporting is used to initiate the discussed posts on r/elonmusk – i.e. in this case *CNN*, *The Guardian*, and *Fortune* magazine. *CNN* and *The Guardian* have been analyzed to exhibit center-left leanings (Morris 2005, 73; Flew 2019, 14), while *Fortune* magazine was initially conceived in the late 1920s to amplify the "industrial and commercial future of [the United States]" (Whitfield 2017, 3). All three outlets operate as for-profit media publications that could be seen as wanting to uphold the current neoliberal hegemony and *status quo*. The reporting of the outlets is, however, not very explicitly present in the analyzed r/elonmusk discussions, as the comments in question focus mostly on the wording of Musk's memo and previously gathered familiarity with Musk's work practices.

[85] 4chan is an image-sharing and discussion platform that has been linked to the political alt-right and the proliferation of racist hate speech online (see Rieger et al. 2021). The platform is also often discussed for its ability to generate memes and online jokes in this vein (see Zannettou et al. 2018), the lowbrow element of which the r/elonmusk moderator is likely referencing. In both of these functions, 4chan has been studied as a point of comparison to the alt-right forums and communities of Reddit.

that they do not want to see discussed on the forum: "Go elsewhere to whine about […] emerald mines or your spontaneous fascination with the limits of frozen peaches[86] on public websites." The reference to emerald mines alludes to Musk's childhood and affluent background (see section 2.2), while the latter stipulation touches on Musk's desire to advance free speech on Twitter.

This type of mocking critique of Musk's character or background would seem to be what the moderator refers to as the negative tone of the forum, and also what might have gotten the user behind the comment P3–C4 banned. The descriptions of unwanted behavior would also seem to align with the forum's no. 1 rule of "No toxicity."

The banning of the user for mocking Musk's "grand vision" (P3–C4) is perhaps the strongest case so far that the forum does show tendencies of echo chamberization and of insulating itself away from critique of Musk (see Morini et al. 2021). The moderating away of undesirable content does not, however, seem to extend to all critique. The user who criticized Musk's handling of the Twitter transition for "demanding crunch and grueling hours for a social media platform" (P3–C5) has their comment still present without interference from the moderation team. Based on the moderator's pinned post, it would seem that the forum welcomes debate and criticism about Musk's actions (see P3–C5) while looking down on forms of ridiculing critique about Musk as a person (see P3–C4).

The extent to which r/elonmusk is enforced as an echo chamber of Musk's admirers has bearing on whether the forum acts as an ideological apparatus in service of the Silicon Valley ethic. In answering the latter question, we have looked at the totality of the discussion practices on the forum (see section 2.4) and how these affect the forum's overall sentiment about the Silicon Valley ethic and its values. We have looked at how the ethic is generally argued on the forum both for and against, the users' rhetoric and tone in the discussions, as well as the effect of Reddit's voting system on the popularity and visibility of the comments. In this section, the effect of moderation and forum-specific rules are considered in how they affect debate about Musk's preferred work practices.

The presence of strict moderation and guidelines of discussion can help us answer whether r/elonmusk acts as an apparatus with an encoded message about the Silicon Valley ethic, as

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[86] The expression "frozen peaches" is the moderator's critical twisting of the expression "freeze peach," a mocking homophone of "free speech" that has been used in discourse against Musk's guiding mission for Twitter (see *The Pull Request* 2022).

discussed earlier (see section 3.2) Stuart Hall's (2019, 272–274) influential theory of mass media engagement sees media productions, such as television programs, as having dominant "encoded" messages that audiences can read along with or potentially renegotiate in some way. The analysis of the comments and the moderation in this section has shown that there are types of content that r/elonmusk strives to favor and promote, while its moderation team goes about suppressing less desired types of content.

That said, the moderation team expresses in the discussed pinned post that it is failing in its task of promoting the type of content it wants and that the forum is overrun with users who go against the team's values. The "influx of guests" on the forum speaks to Reddit's vastness as a platform and the relatively open manner with which users move between subreddits that they either have subscribed to or are just visiting.

The forum has been analyzed to be quite open about its admiration of Musk in a way that makes itself clear to even users who casually visit the forum (see section 2.3). This contextual knowledge of the forum's values could drive Reddit users to assume that, if the forum did have a kind of intended and "encoded" message about Musk's work culture, it would likely be quite favorable and positive in nature.

Does that potential inference mean that there is a pro-ethic message encoded in the discussions as the forum acts as a possible apparatus for the ethic? I argue that no, since even with the moderation team's attempts to shape the discussions, the users who post and comment on the forum still have considerable say in how the forum as a whole defines itself in relation to the Silicon Valley ethic and its practices.

The individual users still formulate the specific content and argumentation about the ethic on the forum and they also choose which arguments about the topic become most seen and most engaged with through the process of voting. These users can include ones that argue against the ethic – or at least Musk's application of it – as in the case of the users discussed here who argue that "Musk Has No Vision for Twitter or Appealing Mission for Its Employees."

Critical arguments such as these have popularity and acceptance on the forum too, even among the more upvoted positive arguments. The determination of the forum's overall sentiment about a single issue like the ethic would seem to be too open-ended to consider the forum to have a clear encoded message about a given topic, even as the moderation team tries consistently to set limits on what should and should not be discussed on the forum.

Not necessarily having an encoded message about the Silicon Valley ethic does not mean that r/elonmusk can not be an ideological apparatus that further socializes Reddit users into accepting and embracing the ethic's values. The analysis so far has shown quite the opposite: Many of the top comments on the forum openly embrace the ethic and Musk's implementation of it at Twitter (see chapter 4), with some of the critical top comments also being ideologically influenced enough to only lightly tease Musk about his management decisions (see section 5.1). The accumulated effect of these popular comments would likely be enough to suggest to users who are visiting the forum that the work practices applied by Musk and associated with the Silicon Valley ethic are something to embrace and value.

That r/elonmusk is not a socializing space with an inevitable encoded message is an important distinction to make, because it gets us closer to how the forum functions ideologically and because it underlines the presence of critique on the forum that should be further nurtured. The forum could alternatively be seen as a site of common sense processing, in the sense that Antonio Gramsci (1992, 199) refers to common sense as the "popular conception of the world" that becomes entrenched in sediments throughout different periods of history. We have, for instance, seen the users on the forum engage in internal ideological struggle about everyday work conceptions (see section 4.2) and be swayed in debate by the common sense involved in innovation as an objective thought form (see section 4.3).

Particularly, the forum could be seen as a common sense space for the more geek-y segments of people who are active online, as they have been called on by both Musk and Reddit (see section 5.1) and as they have prominently made themselves known in the discussions through identifying as workers in the tech industry. These segments are furthermore often associated with white masculinity (Massanari 2017, 332), but in the pseudoanonymity of Reddit as a platform, such designations about the forum are harder to make more conclusively.

White masculinity and geek-y interests do, however, constitute the dominant culture on Reddit and mark the platform's primary segment of users it is trying to reach as a capitalist media actor (see section 2.1). In this overlap with Reddit's dominant discussion culture, r/elonmusk too should be read in its function as a distinct common sense space as being shaped by Reddit's profit motive as a media company and platform.

In distinction from traditional mass media, those who engage with Reddit as a platform would also seem to end up doing a large degree of their own ideological socialization, as users cohere themselves into distinct communities and enforce self-appointed forum rules. We have

seen traces of this type of socialization in the analysis of moderation on r/elonmusk in this section. This type of fallible and user-driven socialization, I argue, means that there is also more potential for expressing critique and engaging in ideological struggle on a forum like r/elonmusk than there would be in negotiating an encoded ideological message of most other types of mass media product.

5.2.2 Justifying a Critical Presence on the Forum

The harsh moderation has reverberations beyond the banning of the user who wondered whether Musk will be able to build Twitter into his "grand vision" (P3–C4). The most popular reply to this comment begins with a further critical questioning if Musk has employees left to realize any vision for the company:

P3–C4–1   15 △ ▽

Him and what army? Honestly I came to this subreddit to see how people who admire him are explaining these past few weeks and I'm still looking for a reasonable explanation. Before you come at me: I was Team Elon until his Twitter take over, always aspired to work at Tesla as a dream company, so I'm not some Elon hater.

> P3–C4–2   2 △ ▽
>
> *I came to see how far up his ass they would be, and the answer is hilariously predictable*
>
> > P3–C4–3   1 △ ▽
> >
> > *Right? Even the top comment on this post is "yeah I like him but not for me thanks".*

The quoted comments provide a self-reflective commentary on the forum as an online discussion space, with comments P3–C4–1 and P3–C4–3 being posted by the same user. Both users brand themselves as outsiders to the forum, visiting to see how Musk's Twitter buyout is received by a perceived userbase of "people who admire him" (P3–C4–1).

The perception of r/elonmusk as a community of Musk's admirers is so strong that one of the users tries to prevent potential criticism coming their way, claiming that they used to be a Musk supporter until Musk's acquisition of Twitter. The user in question even "aspired to work at Tesla as a dream company" (P3–C4–1), underlining again the presence of those working in tech-related fields on the forum. Having to justify an affection for Musk and to refute being "some Elon hater" (P3–C4–1) is not seen just in this comment, but also in a top

comment to which the same user makes reference: "Even the top comment in this post is 'yeah I like him but not for me thanks'" (P3–C4–3).[87]

Where does this safeguarding from potential criticism come from? The comments are in reply to the user who got banned for their comment, but it is not possible to ascertain whether the replies were posted before or after the banning was made public by the user.[88] Seeing that another user got banned for their criticism of Musk could lead the user posting P3–C4–1 and P3–C4–3 to feel like they have to justify their own critical presence on the forum.

The commenter in-between would seem to be aware before coming in to post that the forum's users would in general be "up [Musk's] ass" (P3–C4–2). The user that is professing to be a former admirer of Musk seems to likewise be operating on preconceived notions of what conversation is like on r/elonmusk. Even if the users are not personally familiar with r/elonmusk as a discussion space, they could be ascribing it a fervor and admiration of Musk based on contextual knowledge about Musk's fame and the activity of his online following elsewhere.

Harsh moderation and a perception of r/elonmusk as a potential echo chamber for Musk's following can in this way discourage further debate about Musk's work practices and their value. The forum might not have a preconceived encoded message about the Silicon Valley ethic, but users who do not feel part of the community may ascribe one to it based on their prior understanding of the forum. This much is expressed in the comment of the user who comes to the forum to see how "people who admire [Musk] are explaining these past few weeks" (P3–C4–1). The negative effect of preconceptions such as these is that they make the forum overall more weighted and one-dimensional as a discussion environment and less prone to open critique of Musk and his work practices.

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[87] The top comment referenced is not P3–C1, the most upvoted comment of the post which features a meme of Leonardo DiCaprio. It is more likely that the comment being referenced is the second most upvoted comment that begins with the following disclaimer: "In general I think pretty positively of Elon Musk but I wouldn't want to work for him" (P3–C2; 107 △ ▽). The comment in question could have occupied the spot of being the most upvoted comment at the time of the posting of P3–C4–3. The full comment P3–C2 will be analyzed more in depth in the following section.

[88] Reddit gives timestamps to when comments are posted by the second, but does not update these timestamps to include edits made after an initial posting.

5.3 "Work Environment in Musk's Companies Is Toxic"

5.3.1 To Work for Musk or Not – Equity Payment as Variation of the Wage-Form

P2–C3   18 △ ▽

Long history of Tesla and space x employees complaining about a toxic work environment. Looks like Twitter employees are getting the same treatment

P3–C2   107 △ ▽

In general I think pretty positively of Elon Musk but I wouldn't want to work for him.

If my company treated employees the way Elon has in this case I'd be jumping ship too. 3 months severance would make that a pretty easy decision.

The argument that "Work Environment in Musk's Companies Is Toxic," as put forth by the quoted comments, gets closest in the analyzed discussions so far to condemning Musk's work practices and the Silicon Valley ethic in general. The users do not specify what they find toxic and apprehensive in the work culture of Musk's companies, but they seem to agree that in general the treatment of employees in the companies is poor.[89]

The latter comment P3–C2 couches its critique in language that is more favorable towards Musk in general. Aside from the admission to thinking positively of Musk, the comment limits its initial claim of not wanting to work for Musk with a stipulation about Musk's management decisions having been poor primarily during the Twitter acquisition: "If my company treated employees the way Elon has in this case I'd be jumping ship too" (P3–C2; emphasis added).

Even with the user's favorable language towards Musk,[90] the quoted comments represent a kind of critical peak on the forum with regard to the Silicon Valley ethic. The comment P3–C2 exists in a tension between a critique of the ethic's implementation at Twitter and its prevalence in Musk's companies in general, but it still is perhaps the most prominent critical comment in all of the analyzed posts with 107 upvotes in total. The comment can be taken as

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[89] The claims of a toxic work culture at Musk's companies could refer to a number of reported activity and behavior discussed in the media. For more discussion of these reports, see section 2.2.

[90] This kind of justification of one's critique on the forum was found to be present in the previous section too (see section 5.2).

further indication that criticism of Musk and his work practices is allowed and can even be somewhat popular on the forum.

As the most manifest critical expressions on the forum, the comments are also met with ardent defense of both Musk and the ethic in their most popular replies:

P2–C3–1   27 △ ▽

STILL SpaceX and Tesla are two of the most wanted companies in the world to work for. Tesla is now over $650 billion worth, 6th biggest company in the world. SpaceX is now over $150 billion worth, biggest unicorn in the world. Something this man needs to do right?

P3–C2–1   69 △ ▽

I would work for him if I was 20, had no girlfriend, or kids, and was looking for a motivating challenge. To maybe retire at 30.

Musk is hardcore, and made Paypal survive through the .com recession, Tesla and SpaceX through the sub prime recession, and leaded his staff to build thriving companies. Tesla is leading the EV revolution, SpaceX is leading the space launch industry. He was thrown out from Paypal, but is clearly looking into completing what it could have been by using Twitter.

I wouldn't bet against him. If he keeps only a couple of hundred employees that are motivated enough, he'll turn this thing around anyway, and it's going to prove that Twitter was overly bloated with useless employees.

Edit: I know Paypal is harder to justify, but it's funny how everyone replying are attacking this one point, ignoring all the rest. 🤷‍♂️

The first reply defends the work culture in Musk's companies by highlighting the financial success of Tesla ("6th biggest company in the world") and SpaceX ("biggest unicorn[91] in the world") (P2–C3–1). The user suggests that, regardless of reports of toxicity, Musk's companies remain as some of the most sought after places of employment for workers in the industry.

The latter comment – of which the opening has been already discussed extensively (see sections 3.2 and 3.4) – also praises the success of Musk's other companies. Both comments make the familiar argument that "Musk's Work Culture Has Worked Before," leading the latter user to argue that they "wouldn't bet against [Musk]" in being successful with implementing a new work culture at Twitter too.

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[91] The concept of a unicorn refers to privately held startup companies with "reported valuations of $1 billion or more" (Aran 2019, 910).

The toxicity that is potentially present in Musk's companies is thus justified based on Musk's previous business success. The comment P2–C3–1 particularly emphasizes the financial success that Musk and his companies have seen, referencing the valuation of his two biggest companies.

Materialist ideology-theory suggests that an admiration of the financial success of billionaire-entrepreneurs like Musk is embedded in the class structures of neoliberal capitalism. Jan Rehmann (2013, 286) has argued that 99% of income-earners must believe that the upper 1% of earners have come by their wealth "by their own efforts." An argument along these lines is expressed by the user who rhetorically asks "Something this man needs to do right?" (P2–C3–1) – suggesting that Musk is the person most responsible for the financial success of his companies. This belief in a moral connection between achievement and reward is assumed in neoliberal capitalist economies in order for the masses to tolerate the extreme polarisation of wealth that comes with the dominant economic system (Rehmann 2013, 286–287).

Stuart Hall (1988, 45) noted in the early days of neoliberalism that ideology could organize classes to act against their own interests and in this way interrupt their "lines of solidarity and resistance" against the domination of capital. Such a line of solidarity could be seen as being crossed by the other discussed user who also admires Musk's success and wishes to be financially secure enough to "retire at 30" (P3–C2–1) themselves.

The latter comment has already been analyzed with regard to why the user might want to work for Musk and why they might accept the toxic work culture in Musk's companies (see section 3.4). The allure of equity-based payment and its ability to have tech workers "retire at 30" can, however, be looked at more in depth with the further help of materialist theory. The admiration of Musk's success and the subjugation involved in equity-based payment can be seen with more clarity through the structure of the wage-form.

The wage-form is an objective thought form[92] outlined by Karl Marx as referring to the paid wage of the worker seemingly accounting for all the labor the worker has provided, that is, the entire working day. Marx argues that, in fact, the wage only encompasses the labor necessary for the worker to reproduce his or her labor-power, not the expended surplus-labor from which the capitalist goes on to source surplus-value for themselves. (Rehmann 2013, 44.) For Marx (1976, 680), the wage-form extinguishes "the division of the working day into

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[92] For more discussion of objective thought forms and their relation to ideology-theory, see section 4.3.

necessary labour and surplus labour, into paid labour and unpaid labour." As an objective thought form guiding everyday practice and imposing a "silent compulsion" of economic relations, the wage-form thus helps the capitalist as they try to "receive as much labour as possible for as little money as possible" (ibid. 682).

In the Silicon Valley method of equity payment, it would seem that the given major shareholder's attempt at receiving as much labor for as little money as possible is intensified, while the worker is acutely aware that they are not being paid for all of their working hours committed (see section 3.4). Workers enter employment relations like this because they are motivated by the potential of an eventual big payout through their equity.

As objective thought forms can make workers feel "completely at home" even in "estranged and irrational forms" (Marx 1981, 969), so the equity-based employment relation can feel natural and self-evident to tech workers. Like the wage-form makes workers assume they are being paid for the entire working day, so the workers in tech startups and companies may think that the compensation for the entirety of their working hours will eventually come in the form of a company going public or being sold. What is owed to the workers – including the compensation for intense and unpaid hours of overtime (Mannevuo 2015, 130) – will come belatedly sometime in the future, while the working relation in the meantime benefits mostly the company's leadership and majority owner.

The user who wishes to work for Musk and possibly "retire at 30" (P3–C2–1) can be seen as operating under the influence of this equity-based variation of the wage-form. What motivates workers in many startup companies is the notion that if they work hard enough, they can achieve success and become wealthy like Musk and other successful tech entrepreneurs highlighted in the media (see Crandall et al. 2021, 848). The Silicon Valley ethic and its practices of equity-based payment thus feed into the neoliberal connection made between great wealth and achievement of one's "own efforts" (Rehmann 2013, 286). The ideological effect of this relation is enough for workers in the industry – e.g. potentially the user behind comment P3–C2–1 – to accept a potentially toxic work environment and subjugative practices, while overlooking the very low likelihood of achieving great wealth and a big payout through an equity share in a startup company (Hyrkäs 2016, 22; see section 3.4).[93]

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[93] The most upvoted comment of P1 touches on the subject equity compensation and the situation of Twitter employees under Musk in asking: "Do they pay extremely hardcore salaries to match? In comparison to other tech companies" (P1–C1; 212 △ ▽). The comment and its replies would warrant a deeper analysis on their own;

5.3.2 Technological Feats vs. Treatment of Workers

The acceptance of Musk's potentially toxic work cultures is questioned with more nuance in the following replies posted to the top comment P3–C2, in which a user professes to thinking "pretty positively" (P3–C2) of Musk even if they would not want to work for him. The comments display the type of ideological struggle that is possible on the forum and underline again Musk's ability as an ideological actor to obtain further levels of consent for his preferred work practices:

P3–C2–2   16 △ ▽

How can you think positively of someone who does shit like this on the regular?

        P3–C2–3   8 △ ▽

        Because it's not being done to them personally, so it's easier to justify his treatment of others.

        P3–C2–4   9 △ ▽

        Because from an engineering perspective I think he's done/lead some amazing projects.

        Its just a shame he doesnt treat his employees better.

In all of the quoted comments, there is recognition that the work environment in Musk's companies is toxic, echoing the arguments made in the top comments P2–C3 and P3–C2. The lattermost comment, i.e. P3–C2–4, displays Musk's pull as an ideological actor and his potential for vertical socialization with regard to people intrigued by his persona. It is not just Musk's amassing of wealth that is admired on the forum, but also his technological feats that can contribute to a tacit acceptance of the work practices in Musk's companies, as the user behind the comment makes the concession that "from an engineering perspective" (P3–C2–4) they still think positively of Musk.

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such an analysis is not done here because the top comment in question was classified in the "Neutral/Questioning" category in the initial analysis of the comment body. The discussion in the replies to the comment evolves into a long debate about whether private companies like Twitter offer stock options as compensation and the implications that has on the future and finances of the company's employees. Overall the discussions give an impression that certain practices of the Silicon Valley ethic, such as extremely long hours, are acceptable to the users if the level of equity compensation is high enough. As the most upvoted comment thread throughout the three analyzed posts, the discussion's focus and acceptance of these practices speaks to the rather pervasive level of ideological influence that the forum is under with regard to the Silicon Valley ethic and its values.

The user does still think it is a "shame that [Musk] doesn't treat his employees better" (P3–C2–4), but the concession about Musk's achievements goes some way to excuse this. Admiration of Musk's tech genius – a status that is often repeated in profiles of Musk in the media (see *Time* 2021b, *The Atlantic* 2022) – would seem to be largely harmonious with the privileged position and credence afforded to the richest and most successful capitalists in the U.S. that has been analyzed in this study before (see section 4.3).

In the other two comments P3–C2–2 and P3–C2–3, there is recognition and condemnation of the toxic work practices themselves, not just their implementation at Twitter as has often been the case in previous analyses. The user who posted the comment P3–C2–2 questions how anyone can think of positively of someone who "does shit like this on the regular" (P3–C2–2), referencing Musk's managerial choices and work culture as he is in the process of implementing at Twitter. Both of these comments have been shown some approval in the form of upvotes – 16 and 8, respectively – suggesting that there is room on r/elonmusk for arguing against the Silicon Valley ethic and not just its promotion.

The comments show ideological struggle taking place on r/elonmusk against Musk's work practices. Whereas the user who excuses Musk due to his tech genius makes an argument based on common sense elevation of media-supported and highly visible capitalists, the user behind the comment P3–C2–3 calls for empathy for Musk's employees working in toxic environments. The user argues that those who excuse Musk do so because they do not face the toxicity of his companies personally, meaning for them it is easier "to justify [Musk's] treatment of others" (P3–C2–4). The comment exemplifies the type of critical engagement that r/elonmusk can still host with regard to the Silicon Valley ethic and that I have sought to further argue for and support in this analysis.

<div align="center">***</div>

Whereas the analysis in the previous chapter found that discussions on r/elonmusk for the most part promoted the Silicon Valley ethic, the discussions analyzed in this chapter have displayed more direct criticism of the ethic while also swerving away from critique in some ways. The criticism that we have seen has no longer been confined merely to Musk's implementation of the ethic at Twitter, but has instead been directed at the toxic practices alleged in Musk's companies in general.

At the same time, some of the critique has been defused through harsh lines of moderation and by the users participating in carnevalistic joking about Musk that was seen to ultimately serve both Musk and Reddit's interests. These two qualities of the forum as a discussion environment contributed to overall less critical debate about the ethic and to a stronger impression of r/elonmusk as somewhat echo chamberized around its admiration of Musk.

Taken with the findings of chapter 4, the analysis here contributes to an understanding that r/elonmusk does act as an ideological apparatus of the Silicon Valley ethic that would likely try to socialize its visitors into further embracing and accepting the ethic and its values. While not necessarily having an encoded message about the ethic due to the openness of Reddit as a platform, the endorsement of the ethic in the comments and debates analyzed remains rather strong. In this endorsement, the forum can be seen as a site of common sense processing particularly for the white and masculine-coded geek communities that both Musk and Reddit call out in their profit-driven goals of having more online followers and more active users on their platform, respectively.

The analysis in this chapter did show that there is support and popularity for more direct critiques of Musk and his work practices on the forum, too. The open nature of Reddit as a platform means that there can be users among the discussions who would rather see Musk's application of the Silicon Valley ethic and its toxic consequences be intervened in and stopped altogether. These users were seen arguing against the more common sense practice of embracing the ethic and being ideologically influenced by an admiration of Musk as a successful capitalist.

6 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have sought to answer whether Reddit's r/elonmusk forum acts as an ideological apparatus in service of the Silicon Valley work ethic and its dominating set of work practices. Put another way, I have tried to see whether the forum's overall sentiment about the ethic would ideologically seek to socialize Reddit users and visitors to the forum into further accepting and embracing the ethic's key values. Analyzing both prominent positive and negative arguments made on the forum about how Elon Musk has implemented the Silicon Valley ethic at Twitter, I argue here that r/elonmusk does act as a distinct apparatus that through its discussions will likely promote the ethic to a wider segment of the public.

The analyzed positive arguments were expectedly very open in their appreciation of the ethic and its core tenets. The discussions saw users on r/elonmusk, for instance, 1) adopting and speaking ideologically through Musk's "hardcore" work rhetoric, 2) being exceedingly taken by Musk's status as an intellectual of the ruling class in what amounts to a cultic capitalist practice of venerating successful businessmen in the U.S., and 3) arguing for flexible work practices while influenced by the value of innovation as an objective thought form.

The replies to these discussions saw critical arguments made against the implementation of Silicon Valley work practices at Twitter, displaying elements of Gramscian "good sense" in their questioning of the startup-like practices and their fit at Musk's newly acquired company. In the analysis, I strived to extend this critical questioning of the users towards re-evaluating the discussed work practices in and of themselves, as opposed to purely objecting to their recent application at Twitter by Musk.

There was more direct critique present in the prominent negative arguments analyzed that were for a large part culled from the third discussed post on r/elonmusk, made after Twitter employees had begun to resign in response to Musk's "hardcore" internal memo. However, even here the users' potential for critique was in effect derailed by Musk and Reddit's ideological call to suspend hierarchy in a carnevalist moment of joking around as well as by the forum's stricter enforcement of its community rules and moderation guidelines. Arguments about the toxicity of work culture in Musk's companies were countered by users still admiring Musk due to wanting to achieve wealth like his through the Silicon Valley practice of equity payment and due to Musk's elevated status in the media as a tech genius.

The analysis of the most prominent arguments and debates on the forum showed extensive popularity for the ethic and its practices overall, a sign of the success Musk has had as a notable media actor and capitalist ideologue in service of the ethic. In its relation to the Silicon Valley ethic, the r/elonmusk forum can be seen as a site of common sense processing for segments of online geek communities – often marked in their values by the presence of white masculinity – that both Musk and Reddit call out to in their respective profit-driven motives.

The Silicon Valley ethic in itself was also seen as primarily serving to motivate middle class and white male workers in the tech industry, while undermining the lower-waged work done in the industry by women and racially marginalized workers. In this further enforcement of hierarchical domination, the ethic is closely connected to the various reports of toxicity and abuse of workers taking place in Musk's companies – showing the real-life consequences of the ethic's application and why the spreading of Silicon Valley work values in the media should be intervened in as I have done here.

The r/elonmusk forum was still seen to be open to critical contestation of the Silicon Valley ethic and its practices, partially due to Reddit's relatively open platform structure that allows users to easily move between subforums and communities. Even with its express values of admiration of Musk embedded into the forum's official descriptions and rules, r/elonmusk should not be thought of as having an encoded ideological message about the ethic in its discussions. This lack of a predetermined message also marks why the forum's attempts at socializing Reddit users into accepting the Silicon Valley ethic can be effectively intervened in through critical argumentation – as done both by myself in this analysis and by the critical users who participate in the forum discussions.

The admiration of Musk present on the forum brings us to the secondary research question of whether r/elonmusk acts as an echo chamber for Musk's considerable online following. Based on the analysis of the forum discussions, I argue that the forum does show prominent tendencies of echo chamberization – e.g. in its hardline moderation against ridiculing anti-Musk comments – while not fully trying to insulate itself away from critique of Musk and his actions. However, it should be noted that what may seem like criticism of Musk in the forum discussions can in fact be the result of Musk wielding his ideological influence on his "cult-like" online following – as in the case of the carnivalesque moment of the users teasing Musk's transition of management at Twitter.

Echo chamber studies of Reddit communities have for the most part been driven by computational methods and large quantitative data sets, but the analysis here shows that discussions on Reddit can be very layered in their ideological influences and as a result should not be thought of as evident in their expressed values. In this finding, I support calls within media studies for more qualitative analysis of social media spaces in order to better understand how ideological values can be spread online and how echo chamberized spaces may – instead of simply insulating themselves from disagreeing points of view – absorb critique of their values as part of their discussion practices.

Aside from the opposition between big data analysis and qualitative critical analysis, I have in this thesis participated in wider theoretical debate within media studies about the role of ideology as a critical tool of analysis, particularly with regard to studying social media. I have argued against idealist conceptions of ideology as put forth by multiple scholars in *Media, Culture & Society* and by Christian Fuchs, and in the process I have strived to reclaim the influential formulations on ideology in the media made by Stuart Hall in the 1970s and 1980s back to a more materialist lineage of analysis.

In support of this theoretical argument, the thesis overall has shown how social media discussions are formed under the ideological influence of multiple intersecting and overlapping material media actors. The materialist ideology-theoretical analysis of r/elonmusk and its relation to the Silicon Valley ethic has in this way acted as a showcase for the materialist tools of analysis adopted here from wide-ranging scholars and thinkers including Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Projekt Ideologie-Theorie and its acolytes, as well as the already mentioned Hall. I argue that these tools have the ability to yield vital critical insight in today's media landscape, particularly in how ideological practices in the media should be intervened in and how social media spaces should be analyzed as material actors and apparatuses themselves.

As the first large-scale analysis of r/elonmusk as a media space, the present study leaves out many avenues for future research on the forum and its noted community of admirers of Musk. In its considerable breadth of discussion, further studies could analyze the forum's relation to Musk in discussions on Musk's personal life as well as his politics beyond the ideological work values and practices discussed here. The forum's relationship to Musk's Twitter account and social media presence should also be discussed more in depth, particularly in looking at

what kinds of further connections are made between the forum and Musk's calls to online geek communities through his consistent sharing of memes and jokes.

Reddit as a platform and object of study – with its millions of specialized subcommunities and increasing influence in the media landscape – remains particularly ripe for more ideological analysis. What I hope will be analyzed with regard to Reddit is its seemingly innocuous calls made to the values of geek-y white men and their respective interests. With the alt-right communities of Reddit and their politics of domination spilling over into everyday politics of the U.S., there is clearly more need to study how this particular demographic segment coheres itself into communities and comes together to enforce shared political and ideological values with material results. The present study has strived to contribute to this discussion by seeing how ideological values may come to be promoted in a Reddit forum that is ostensibly designated for more purely entertaining and geek-y content of discussing Musk and his companies.

Musk's growing influence and power in the media will also need to be considered and critically approached in academic study. Through his acquisition of Twitter, Musk has assumed an influential position to shape political expression, everyday social discourse, and – as per his guiding mission – the democratic potential for free speech, particularly in the U.S. but also throughout the rest of the world. Shifting Twitter's business model to favor accounts who have paid for a monthly subscription shows that Musk's mission with Twitter is also closely tied to a profit-motive and to a desire to increase his already near-inconceivable level of wealth. As the owner and most widely followed account on Twitter, Musk will be able to ideologically socialize his "cult-like" online following into embracing his personal values more effectively than before. This newfound power in the media – like the profit-driven calling of Reddit to geek-y white men – will need to be approached with real urgency in critical analysis.

Musk and Reddit have both contributed to the further spreading of Silicon Valley work practices and values, as this study has shown. The Silicon Valley work ethic has been studied extensively in multiple different fields, with a heavy emphasis on sociological studies of the practices and various discourses associated with the ethic. As the ethic has continued to spread outside of the U.S. and into localized national startup cultures, however, there have been potential new avenues of study for media scholars to consider with regard to the ethic and its promotion.

Further media analyses could, for instance, look at the presence of Silicon Valley values comparatively as they have emerged in different national startup scenes and cultural media environments. Aside from social media, startup work practices come to be promoted through a variety of media engagement and materials – these include promotional industry events, advertising campaigns, official company websites and other forms of outreach, job listings, as well as interviews with various startup founders and beacons of the industry. Looking at these materials, media scholars should try to see what are the overlapping qualities between localized national startup scenes and their engagement with their respective media culture.

This kind of study would be apt to see how Silicon Valley work values are trying to get a further foothold in everyday work conceptions and real-life work settings. By first understanding how the values are doing this, we can from there move on to consider how best to defuse and intervene in their spreading more effectively and intently.

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Suomenkielinen tiivistelmä

Tämä tutkielma käsittelee sosiaalinen media -alusta Redditin alaforumin r/elonmuskin ideologista suhdetta niin kutsuttuun Piilaakson työetiikkaan ("Silicon Valley work ethic"). Käsite viittaa alistavaan joukkoon työkäytäntöjä ja -arvoja, jotka ovat saaneet alkunsa Kalifornian Piilaaksoon sijoittuvassa teknologiateollisuuden keskuksessa ja startup-kulttuurin kehdossa. Kovaan työntekoon ja uhrautumiseen perustuva työetiikka on saanut viime vuosina näkyvyyttä miljardööri-yrittäjä Elon Muskin myötä. Musk soveltaa etiikkaan liittyviä arvoja omassa henkilökohtaisessa työelämässään: Musk on mediassa todennut muun muassa tekevänsä 100-tuntisia työviikkoja (*CNBC* 2018a) ja nukkuvansa usein toimistollaan, jotta hän voisi tehdä enemmän töitä teknologiayritystensä puolesta (*BBC* 2022). Musk myös edellyttää samanlaista uhrautumista ja omistautumista työntekijöiltään (*Bloomberg* 2018).

Muskin julkisuuden ja media-aktiivisuuden myötä Piilaakson etiikan arvot ovat saaneet laajempaa huomiota, ja tämä huomio on ylettynyt myös Muskin "kultinomaiseen" (*Vox* 2017) seuraajajoukkoon Internetissä. Suuri osa tästä seuraajajoukosta on löytänyt tiensä Redditin r/elonmusk-forumille, joka on omistautunut keskustelemaan Muskin julkisuuskuvasta mediassa ja hänen yritystensä vaiheista.

Muskin soveltamat työkäytännöt herättivät forumilla erityisen paljon keskustelua vuoden 2022 marraskuussa, kun varmistui että Musk ostaa sosiaalinen media -sivusto Twitterin. Julkisuuteen vuoti tuolloin Twitterin sisäinen muistio, jossa Musk käskee uusia työntekijöitään tekemään töitä äärimmäisen kovaa ("extremely hardcore") ja valmistautumaan pitkiin ja intensiivisiin työtunteihin ("long hours at high intensity") (*CNBC* 2022a).

Tässä tutkielmassa perehdyn r/elonmusk-forumilla heräämiin keskusteluihin ja väittelyihin liittyen Muskin "hardcore"-muistioon. Musk voidaan erittäin julkisena kapitalistina ja työetiikan puolestapuhujana nähdä ideologina, joka pyrkii levittämään tietoisuutta ja saamaan hyväksyntää työkäytännöilleen. Tutkielma perustuu olettamukselle, että Muskilla on ideologinen vaikuttamisen suhde myös suureen joukkoon seuraajistaan, jotka ihailevat sekä Muskin taloudellista menestystä että hänen innovatiivisia teknologiayrityksiään. Analyysi siis selvittää, onko Musk onnistunut ideologisesti suostuttelemaan seuraajiaan hyväksymään ja ihailemaan myös hänen äärimmäisiä työkäytäntöjään.

Tutkielman ensisijainen tutkimuskysymys on:

- TK1: Toimiiko r/elonmusk-forum itsessään Piilaakson etiikkaa levittävänä ja puoltavana ideologisena apparaattina?

Kysymyksen vastaamiseksi on selvitettävä, kuinka paljon Muskin työetiikasta esitetään puoltavia puheenvuoroja ja myös mahdollisia kriittisiä argumentteja. Koska r/elonmusk on ensisijaisesti tarkoitettu Reddit-käyttäjille, jotka ovat kiinnostuneita keskustelemaan Muskista ja ihailevat Muskia jossain määrin, täydennän tutkimuksen alaa toissijaisella tutkimuskysymyksellä:

- TK2: Toimiiko r/elonmusk-forum niin kutsuttuna kaikukammiona ("echo chamber") Muskin seuraajajoukolle?

Netissä syntyvät kaikukammiot perustuvat jaetuille arvoille ja näkemyksille, joita joko nettiryhmään tai forumiin kuuluvat jäsenet pyrkivät vahvistamaan välttelemällä arvoja kiistäviä ja kyseenalaistavia näkemyksiä (Morini et al. 2021). Toinen tutkimuskysymys auttaa selvittämään, onko r/elonmusk-forumilla vierailevilla Reddit-käyttäjillä mahdollisuutta avoimesti kritisoida Muskia ja toisaalta hänen soveltamiaan työkäytäntöjä.

Analyysi keskittyy kolmeen r/elonmusk-postaukseen, jotka kaikki käsittelevät edellä mainittua "hardcore"-muistiota ja sen aiheuttamia reaktioita Twitterin työntekijöiden keskuudessa. Lähestyn postauksia ja niiden synnyttämiä forum-keskusteluita materialistisen ideologia-teorian ja sen kriittisten välineiden kautta. Materialistisella ideologia-teorialla on yhteiskuntatieteissä pitkä historia ja jatkumo, johon kuuluu tutkijoita ja ajattelijoita Karl Marxista Antonio Gramsciin, Louis Althusseriin, saksalaiseen Projekt Ideologie-Theorieen kollektiiviin ja sen suomalaisiin edustajiin, sekä Stuart Halliin. Tältä jatkumolta omaksun analyyttisia välineitä, joiden avulla r/elonmusk-keskustelujen ideologinen vaikuttuneisuus saadaan paremmin eriteltyä ja ymmärrettyä. Erityisesti Muskin ja Redditin vaikutusta materiaalisina ja ideologisina mediatoimijoina pystytään purkamaan metodologisen välineistön kautta.

Materialistis-ideologista analyysiä etenkin sosiaalisen median alustoista ja keskustelupalstoista on tehty suhteellisen vähän. Suuri osa ideologia-analyyseistä sosiaalisesta mediasta määrittävät ideologian käsitteenä yksioikoisesti poliittiseksi suuntautumiseksi, kun kyseessä on ennemmin hierarkkisista dominaation rakenteista, joilla ihmisiä alistetaan nykyään etenkin vallitsevaan uusliberaaliin kapitalistiseen järjestelmään (Rehmann 2013, 242–243; ks. Kyyrönen 2020, 134–137). Nämä edellä mainitut analyysit edustavat usein myös

alaltaan informaatiotieteitä, jonka mukaisesti analyyseihin edetään metodologisesti kvantitatiivisilla välineillä kriittisten ja kvalitatiivisten sijaan (Fuchs 2017).

Mediatutkimuksen puitteissa ideologasta käsitteenä on kiistelty *Media, Culture & Society* - julkaisun sivuilla etenkin vuosina 2014–2016. Näissä artikkeleissa puidaan Stuart Hallin vaikutusvaltaisia käsityksiä ideologiasta ja mediasta, joita Hall esitti Thatcherin uusliberaalin valtakauden aikana. Artikkeleissa yritetään elinvoimaistaa ideologiaa käsitteenä yhdistämällä sitä metodologisesti muihin kriittisiin lähestymistapoihin, kuten sosiaalisen realismin käsityksiin ja affektiteoriaan. Samalla Hallin alkuperäisiä käsityksiä viedään idealistisempaan suuntaan, jossa ideologia määärittyy vääräksi tietoisuudeksi ("false consciousness") Tämän käsityksen mukaan ideologiset ilmiöt ovat vain illusorisia harhakuvitelmia, jotka kriittinen tutkija voi poistaa yhteiskunnasta osoittamalla niiden virheellisyyden.

Tämän hetken yksi merkittävimmistä mediatutkijoista, Christian Fuchs, argumentoi myös väärän tietoisuuden mukaisen käsityksen puolesta. Fuchs (2014, 102) esittää, että sosiaalisen median kanssakäyminen on aina epäosallistuvaa ("non-participatory") ja että puhe ja poliittinen osallistuminen sosiaalisen median alustoilla hyödyttää ainoastaan mediayrityksiä kapitalistisina toimijoina. Materialistisen ideologiakäsityksen mukaisesti argumentoin Fuchsia vastaan ja esitän, että sosiaalisessa media käydyt keskustelut voivat myös sosiaalistaa nettikeskustelijoita ideologisesti omaksumaan tiettyjä arvoja ja käytäntöjä. Yritän argumentilla ja r/elonmusk-keskusteluiden analyysillä osoittaa, kuinka tarpeellisia materialistis-kriittiset välineet ovat selventämään tämän päivän ideologisia mediailmiöitä ja samalla pyrin kuromaan Hallin analyyttista perintöä takaisin lähemmäs materialistista jatkumoa.

Määritän Redditin ja Muskin vielä tarkemmin tämän materialistisen jatkumon ja etenkin Projekt Ideologie-Theorien käsitteiden myötä osaksi ideologisia valtoja ("ideological powers"), jotka vertikaalisesti sosiaalistavat ihmisiä elämään osana hierarkkisia dominoinnin rakenteita (Haug 1983, 12–13). Tämän käsittelyn kautta myös asettuu kysymys, toimiiko r/elonmusk itsessään tällaisena apparaattina, joka pyrkii sosiaalistamaan Reddit-käyttäjiä omaksumaan Piilaakson ettikkaan kuuluvia rakenteita. Kommenttien analyysissa itsessään kyseenalaistan vielä tarkemmin, voiko tällaista nettiforumia käsitellä Stuart Hallin (Hall 2019, 272–274) kuuluisan sisäänkoodaus-käsitteen ("encoding") kautta, jonka mukaan massamedia tuotantoihin kuten televisio-ohjelmiin on sisäänrakennettu ideologinen viesti, jota vastaanottajat voivat lukea joko viestin myötäisesti tai sitä vastaan.

Ennen kommenttiketjujen tarkempaa analyysiä määritän vielä tarkemmin Piilaakson työetiikalle viisi keskeistä piirrettä, joiden ilmenemistä keskusteluista tarkastellaan. Nämä piirteet ovat:

1) suuren mission tai tavoitteen puolesta työskenteleminen, joka voi mahdollisesti hyödyttää tai jopa pelastaa ihmiskunnan laajemmin (Crandall et al. 2021, 844; see Mannevuo 2015, 115),

2) erittäin pitkät työpäivät ja oletus, että ylityötunteja ei mahdollisesti korvata (Mannevuo 2015, 129–130),

3) omistautumisen ja mukautumisen odotukset työntekijöiltä, jotka hämärtävät työelämän ja muun elämän välisiä rajapyykkejä (Benner 2002, 38; Crandall et al. 2021, 847),

4) odotukset työskentelystä omistautunessa ja pienissä työtiimeissä, joita määrittää hierarkkisuuden puute (Hyrkäs 2016, 122–123; Mannevuo 2015, 121), ja

5) odotukset suuresta rahallisesta palkinnosta, kun Piilaakson etiikkaa hyödyntävä startup-yritys joko myydään kokonaan tai alkaa myymään osakkeitaan julkisesti (Ross 2004, 10; Aran 2018, 1239).

Näiden piirteiden ja Piilaakson työetiikan suhteen kautta muihin työetiikan muotoihin, määritän etiikan joukoksi ideologisia ja alistavia työkäytäntöjä ja arvoja.

Analyysi jakaantuu kahteen lukuun, joista ensimmäisessä käsittelen Muskin ja työetiikan tuomista Twitteriin puoltavia argumentteja Reddit-keskusteluiden suosituimmissa komennteissa. Puoltavat argumentit, joita analyysissa hahmotellaan ovat 1) "Twitterin työntekijät ovat laiskoja ja hemmoteltuja", 2) "Muskin työkulttuuri on toiminut ennenkin" ja 3) "Teknologia-alan työ vaatii omistautumista ja mukautumista".

Analyysi luvussa osoittaa, että Piilaakson työetiikka saa paljon suosiota r/elonmuskin keskusteluissa ja suosituimmaksi äänestetyissä kommenteissa. Käyttäjät omaksuvat Muskin "hardcore"-retoriikkaa tavalla, joka ilmentää Hallin ymmärrystä ideologian kautta puhumisesta ja sen omaksumisesta (Hall 2021, 101). Keskusteluista ilmenee myös arvostusta Muskille vallitsevan kapitalistiluokan orgaanisena intellektuellina (Gramsci 1992, 12). Muskille osoitettu luottamus on merkki Muskin kuulumisesta amerikkalaiseen kultinomaiseen menestysyrittäjien ja -miljonäärien nostattamisen rituaaliin (Benjamin 1996, 288; Rehmann 2011, 148). Argumentti teknologia-alan omistautumisen vaatimuksesta saa myös käyttäjät puhumaan Piilaakson etiikan puolesta, jossa analysoin vaikuttavana voimana olevan innovaation arvo objektiivisena ajatusmuotona (Ampuja 2021, 27). Kritiikkiä etiikkaa

kohtaan esiinty myös suosituimpien kommenttien saamissa vastauksissa, mutta näissäkin yleisemmin arvostellaan Muskin pyrkimystä asettaa startup-mainen työkulttuuri jo vakiintuneeseen Twitteriin.

Negatiiviset argumentit, jotka hahmotan analyysissa, ovat 1) "Muutos Twitter työkulttuurissa on liian kaaottinen", 2) "Muskilla ei ole näkemystä tai missiota Twitterille ja sen työntekijöille", ja 3) "Muskin yritykset ovat toksisia työympäristöjä". Analyysin muodostavat kommentit tulevat pääosin r/elonmusk-postauksesta, joka on julkaistu kaksi päivää Muskin Twitter-muistion julkisuuteen vuotamisen jälkeen. Muistion seurauksena suuri osa Twitterin jäljellä olevista työntekijöistä on ottanut lopputilin. Sen myötä myös r/elonmusk-kommentien päällipuolinen suhtautuminen Muskiin ja muistiion on kauttaaltaan kriittisempi.

Ensimmäisen argumentin analyysi kuitenkin osoittaa, että r/elonmusk-käyttäjien kriittisyys on yhä Muskin ideologisen vaikutusvallan alaista. Käyttäjät vitsailevat Muskin kustannuksella karnevalistisena hetkenä (Rehmann 2013, 249; Kyyrönen 2020, 112), mutta vitsailu osoitetaan olevan Muskin seuraajilleen osoittamaan ideologisen interpellaation tulosta sekä Redditin yleisesti vitsailevan nörttikulttuuriin innoittamaa. Analyysi osoittaa, että kritiikin läsnäolo forumilla ei tarkoita, etteikö se olisi käytännöissään kaikukammionomainen suhteessa Muskin ihannointiin.

Toista argumenttia hankaloittaa kriittisen kommentoijan karkottaminen pois forumilta sen moderoijien toimesta. Käsittelyn avulla osoitan, että forum on entisestään kaikukammiomaisempi suhteessa Muskiin ja häneen osoitettuun kritiikiin. Analyysista käy kuitenkin samalla ilmi, että forumin suhdetta Piilaakson etiikkaan ja sen puoltamiseen ei voida pitää sisäänkoodattuna Hallin käsitteiden mukaisesti. Forum on Redditin rakenteiden ja moderointitiimin vaillinaisuuden takia liian avoin kriittiselle käyttäjille ja heidän vaikutukselleen keskustelun kokonaisuuteen.

Viimeinen negatiivinen argumentti on lähimpänä suoraa kritiikkiä Muskin työkäytäntöistä, mutta tällöinkin forumilla löytyy Muskin ja etiikan puolestapuhujia. Puolestapuhujat osoittavat entisestään forumin toiminnan arkijärkisenä mediatilana sekä Muskin että Redditin ideologisesti kutsumille nörttikäyttäjille, joiden intressejä ja arvoja määrittää vahvasti valkoisen maskuliinisuuden läsnäolo (Massanari 2019, 20).

Redditin r/elonmusk-forum argumentoidaan tutkielman lopussa toimivan Piilaakson etiikan leviämistä auttavana ideologisena apparaattina. Forumkeskusteluja lukevat ja niihin

osallistuvat käyttäjät kohtaavat todennäköisesti etiikan arvoja puolustavia kantoja ja olisivat siten mahdollisen ideologisen sosialisaatioyrityksen kohteita suhteessa etiikkaan. Forum nähtiin analyysissa myös ilmentävän Internetin kaikukammioille ominaista suojautumista kritiikiltä forumilla läsnäolevaa Muskin ihannontia kohtaan. Kriittisille äänille on forumissa paikkansa ja myös jonkin verran suosiota niin suhteessa Muskin arvosteluun kuin hänen työkäytäntöjensäkin kyseenalaistamiseen. Näitä kriittisiä argumentteja olen analyysissa pyrkinyt myös tukemaan ideologiateoreettisella lähestymistavalla ja välineillä.

Tutkielman lopuksi hahmottelen jatkotutkimuksen mahdollisuuksia: r/elonmuskin tapauksessa forumin suhdetta Muskiin voidaan syventää ja tarkastella muista poliittisista näkökulmista. Tässä analyysi on keskittynyt Muskin työarvojen ideologiseen levittämiseen.

Redditiä tulisi tarkastella tarkemmin sen ideologissa kutsuissa valkoisille nörttimiehille, joiden kokoontuminen forumilla on johtanut äärioikeistoilaisen politiikan suurempaan näkyvyyteen ja vaikutusvaltaan Yhdysvalloissa. Muskin lisääntynyttä valtaa ideologina ja Yhdysvaltojen poliittisessa diskurssissa Twitterin ostamisen myötä tulisi myös tutkia tarkemmin.

Piilaakson työetiikka puolestaan on jo muutaman vuosikymmenen ajan ehtinyt levitä Kalifornian ulkopuolelle ja esiintyy nykyään muiden maiden paikallisissa startup-kulttuureissa ja teknologiateollisuudessa. Näiden paikallisten kulttuurien suhdetta mediaan ja Piilaakson etiikan levittämiseen tulisi tutkia vertailevasti eri maiden ja eri startup-keskittymien välillä, jotta etiikan leviämiseen tosielämän työkäytäntöinä voitaisiin puuttua suoremmin.