

‘We are the media now’: why Tesla’s robotaxis were dominated by Elon Musk superfans

Over the years, Tesla has built part of its reputation on hosting big, bold events to generate authentic hype for upcoming releases. The robotaxi launch in Austin, Texas, last week wasn’t one of them.

Coverage of the rollout was dominated by a close-knit cohort of Tesla influencers and Elon Musk superfans, many of whom are openly supportive of the CEO’s vision. Journalists and tech bloggers who might have been more critical of the technology were not only excluded but also actively ridiculed and mocked by Tesla fans and some of their followers for attempting to ask basic questions about the service. In Austin and online, Tesla fans were taking a cue from Musk, who has spent years fomenting a culture of resentment toward critical media.

One of the more prominent influencers, who goes by Zack on X, claimed he was approached multiple times by a Reuters journalist, whom he promptly ignored. That post, which has over 2,000 likes, received supportive responses from other users – one wrote that the publication and other legacy media outlets “can go F themselves.” Another said they would unfollow any account that simply responded to members of the media.

“The best response would [be] to add a precondition and ask them to go on camera blanket apologising for all the lies and smears against Elon and Tesla first,” the account Tesla

insights wrote. "That will shut them up, and make them think!"

That general sentiment reverberated across the parts of X and YouTube most actively covering the launch. Kim Java, a Tesla influencer with 258,000 YouTube subscribers, posted a comment saying she had been contacted by several major media outlets to speak about her experience but turned them down so she could "control [her] own narrative."

The phrase "we are the media now" appears repeatedly in posts and replies related to the robotaxi launch. This so-called alternative media is now receiving the very same closed-door access many of them criticize legacy publications for indulging in.

The end result of that adversarial dynamic, experts tell *The Verge*, is a rollout that feels less like a transparent tech demo and more like a beta test – one amplified by livestreaming influencers who willingly promote Tesla's marketing material. Much of that coverage unfolds within small echo chambers on Musk-owned X and YouTube, where receptive audiences have largely already made up their minds about the robotaxi's significance. Boston University professor and *Meme Wars* author Joan Donovan says the rollout so far this week has been a textbook example of what she calls "corporate propaganda."

"The big push around robotaxis is explicitly about recuperating the reputation of Tesla," Donovan says. "It has a bit of an echo chamber effect."

"The big push around robotaxis is explicitly about recuperating the reputation of Tesla," Donovan says. "It has a bit of an echo chamber effect."

Ed Niedermeyer, author of the *Ludicrous: The Unvarnished Story of Tesla Motors*, who filmed a robotaxi braking hard in the middle of the road when passing a police cruiser, echoes that sentiment and compares the influencers to a "Greek chorus"

collectively working to bolster the robotaxi's perception. Some of that narrative building appeared to be underway on the popular Reddit forum r/SelfDrivingCars. A user posting late last week claimed the forum has been "flooded with Tesla apologist propaganda and disinformation," following the robotaxi launch. Niedermeyer claims he's previously observed a Tesla employee moderating the r/Tesla forum.

"They know what their job is and Tesla knows how to use them," Niedermeyer tells *The Verge*. Donovan and Niedermeyer are outspoken critics of Tesla. Both played active roles in the Tesla Takedown protests organized around the country earlier this year. Needless to say, they aren't in the "superfan" club.

Tesla did not respond to our request for comment. *The Verge* also reached out to several of the influencers cited above but hasn't heard back.

Tesla's new media

This week's bizarre, influencer-led robotaxi event is the culmination of a yearslong evolution by Tesla to subtly cultivate its preferred media while simultaneously sidelining traditional journalistic outlets. Tesla has a long and bitter history of antagonism with the press. The company unofficially dissolved its PR team back in 2020 and has since made a point of dodging reporters' questions about its products and tech stack. Since acquiring Twitter in 2022, Elon Musk has further tilted the playing field by periodically banning accounts critical of him and his companies.

At the same time, Tesla has built a loyal fan base, which Donovan compares to early Apple enthusiasts – eager to call out media critics as biased against Musk and the company. At first, much of that support was organic. The company attracted a devoted following of technologists, clean energy advocates,

and entrepreneurs drawn to its willingness to take big swings at tough problems.

But as Niedermeyer notes, some of that enthusiasm has tapered off in recent years, due in part to a series of underwhelming demos – like last year’s lackluster “We robot” event, which raised new doubts about the company’s ability to deliver on its most ambitious promises around autonomy. Those who remain tend to be reliably loyal and often openly aligned with Tesla’s success.

Boosting Tesla’s image online has its perks. Many in the community share personalized referral codes, which can be redeemed for rewards ranging from a few extra Supercharger miles to discounts on a new car purchase. (Some Tesla owners allege they’ve been abruptly removed from the program after posting content critical of the company.)

“They know what their job is and Tesla knows how to use them.”

Loyal supporters in Tesla’s online ranks may also gain access to exclusive events, as appears to have been the case with the robotaxi launch. Those who own stock in the company, Niedermeyer says, have an even more direct incentive to ensure Tesla is seen in a favorable light.

“The product is so dope they don’t need a PR department,” YouTube creator and Tesla fan Galileo Russell said in an interview with CNN Business. “I got involved with Tesla to make sure the company succeeded.”

Operating in an echo chamber can only work for so long. Eventually, if Musk’s vision of millions of autonomous Teslas zooming through city streets is to be realized, the company will have to open its doors to the broader public – including its detractors. That risks exposing more of the company’s mistakes, which even influencers are already having trouble pushing aside.

“They know what their job is,” Niedermeyer says, “and Tesla knows how to use them.”

<https://www.theverge.com/tesla/694333/tesla-robotaxi-media-influencers-musk-fans>