

The unflattering secrets revealed so far in Elon Musk's latest legal feud

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Tesla chief executive Elon Musk and Sam Altman, CEO of ChatGPT-maker OpenAI, are scheduled to face off in court next week in a case brought by Musk that claims Altman and others enriched themselves by allegedly betraying the artificial intelligence company's founding mission.

The bitter legal feud between the two tech titans is prying open the industry's most powerful circles by spilling the tea of Silicon Valley VIPs.

Hundreds of court filings have revealed cringey texts, emails or private diary entries of Musk, Altman, other OpenAI founders and other public figures. They include Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg privately offering to use his social platforms to help Musk's interests, Musk insulting Amazon Executive Chairman Jeff Bezos (twice) and a journal in which a big MAGA donor muses about becoming a billionaire, according to the filings. (Bezos owns The Washington Post; OpenAI has a content partnership with The Post.)

There will be fireworks in the federal courtroom in Oakland, California, predicted Andrew Stoltmann, a corporate litigation lawyer not involved in the case who has followed it closely. "We are about to witness the landing of the Hindenburg on the deck of the Titanic; we know it's going to be crazy and nasty."

Musk and Altman co-founded OpenAI in 2015, but Musk left the company in an acrimonious split in 2018. His lawsuit, originally filed in 2024, alleges that OpenAI broke its founding pledges to share its technology openly with the world as a nonprofit artificial intelligence research lab. Musk argues that Altman and Greg Brockman, another OpenAI co-founder, conspired to enrich themselves at Musk's expense and asks the court to remove them from their leadership positions and to restore OpenAI to a full nonprofit.

OpenAI has said Musk is simply trying to undercut a competitor to his own AI company, xAI. A spokesperson for OpenAI referred The Post to a website where it has posted running commentary on the dispute. "Motivated by jealousy, regret for walking away from OpenAI and a desire to derail a competing AI company, Elon has spent years harassing OpenAI through baseless lawsuits and public attacks," the site says.

Musk and an attorney for him did not respond to requests for comment. OpenAI declined to make Altman or Brockman available.

Here are five revelations or questions that emerged from a Post review of the court records.

What did Elon Musk do at Burning Man in 2017?

Rhe annual festival in Nevada's desert is a pilgrimage for counterculture types and for Silicon Valley's elite. OpenAI's lawyers have quizzed Musk about his activities during Burning Man in 2017, which they say coincided with the thick of negotiations among him, Altman, Brockman and others over shifting OpenAI's nonprofit status.

OpenAI has said Musk might not accurately remember the discussions. In a September deposition, Musk was repeatedly asked about "rhino ketamine," a concoction that's commonly a mixture of the hallucinogenic and anesthetic drug ketamine and amphetamine stimulants.

Musk testified that he didn't know what rhino ketamine was and did not recall using it at the event. He has previously acknowledged using ketamine, which he said was prescribed to him to treat depression.

Musk's attorneys said asking about Burning Man and drugs at trial would be "inflammatory" and "irrelevant" and asked to exclude those subjects from the trial. The federal judge overseeing the case, Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers, ruled last month that OpenAI can't bring up ketamine in court, but that Burning Man is fair game.

"Musk's attendance at Burning Man in 2017 is relevant to the attention he paid to his negotiations with OpenAI, which supposedly occurred during the same period," she wrote. A "supposed lapse in memory" from ketamine use could be relevant, Gonzalez Rogers wrote, but she said OpenAI's lawyers couldn't point to evidence that suggested Musk used the drug.

Musk's alleged secret agent inside OpenAI was also the mother of four of his children

Rhivon Zilis is a longtime ally of Musk and has worked at several of his companies. She acted as an "Elon whisperer" to OpenAI, Altman said in his deposition, and the company says she served on its board of directors from 2020 to 2023. Documents in the case include text messages in which the pair appear to discuss how Zilis can feed information from inside OpenAI back to Musk.

OpenAI says in the lawsuit that Zilis was secretly informing for Musk at OpenAI's expense, and that she is supporting his claim that Altman and others changed the venture's structure against Musk's wishes.

In 2022, it was revealed publicly that Zilis and Musk had twins together the prior year. The pair started a brief romance around 2016, Zilis said in her deposition in the lawsuit. They now have four children together and are in a romantic relationship, she said.

OpenAI argues Zilis's credibility is undermined by what the company said was a romantic relationship and children with Musk that, it alleges, were "concealed" from OpenAI officials.

Zilis didn't respond to a request for comment.

Among the documents that OpenAI cites is a text exchange between Musk and Zilis just before he quit OpenAI's board in 2018. Zilis asked Musk whether she should stay "close and friendly" with OpenAI to "keep info flowing." (A 2023 message thread in the court filings also showed that Musk was saved in Zilis's phone as "Schrödinger's Cat." Musk seems to enjoy references to this nerdy thought experiment.)

Gonzalez Rogers ruled last month that Musk's relationship with Zilis is "highly relevant to Zilis's credibility and Zilis's role as a conduit between Musk and OpenAI."

Mark Zuckerberg privately offered Musk help and information

Zuckerberg and Musk have verbally sparred for years and even agreed to a physical fight in 2023. (It didn't happen.)

Messages in the court record, however, disclosed a couple of times that Zuckerberg reached out to offer Musk help or information. It may fit a pattern shown in Musk's history of legal battles: Even the rich and powerful kowtow to him.

After a flurry of news articles in February 2025 about Musk's federal government efficiency project, DOGE, that revealed names of several of its staff members, Musk publicly complained that such disclosures may have been criminal acts.

Zuckerberg texted Musk to say that Meta teams were "on alert" to take down "doxxing or threatening" posts. Zuckerberg said Musk should let him know "anything else I can do to help."

Zuckerberg has faced criticism since the text was disclosed in March. He had pledged to give Facebook and Instagram users a freer hand from content moderation, and doubters said last year that Musk was complaining about online activity that was protected by the First Amendment. A spokesman for Meta declined to comment on behalf of the company or Zuckerberg.

Altman also flattered Musk as the executives feuded.

In a 2023 text exchange after Musk posted about his disappointment in OpenAI, Altman told Musk that he was "my hero" and suggested he wouldn't "hurt" Tesla by poaching its employees. Around the same time, Altman also asked Zilis whether he should "tweet something nice about Elon," because Altman said Musk felt slighted for being excluded from a photo of OpenAI's founding.

Musk thinks Jeff Bezos is a 'tool'

OpenAI has long been hungry for computer horsepower to fuel its AI ambitions, and filings in the case show Musk or Altman repeatedly pressing other technology companies for free or cut-price AI computer power.

In a 2016 email exchange between Musk and Altman about such a negotiation, Musk said he'd prefer to rely on computing power from Microsoft over Amazon because Musk believed that Bezos "is a bit of a tool" and that Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella was not.

OpenAI ultimately went with Microsoft, which is also a major investor in OpenAI and a defendant in Musk's lawsuit.

Musk has had a longstanding spat with Bezos over their dueling space projects. In a September deposition, Musk doubled down on the "tool" diss of his fellow billionaire when asked about it. "He can be, you know," Musk replied, and added, "There's a redemption arc for all of us."

A spokesman for Bezos didn't have a comment. A Microsoft spokesman referred to a court filing that said the company's investments in OpenAI "helped to fund one of the largest nonprofits in the world" and "was necessary for OpenAI to pursue its mission." The spokesman declined to comment on the Musk email.

The secret diary of a Trump-backing executive that's central to the case

Brockman, who started as OpenAI's chief technology officer and is now its president, wrote notes to himself agonizing over whether to align with Musk or Altman during the battle over who would control OpenAI.

Brockman's personal notes are a key part of Musk's case, which alleges that Brockman revealed in 2017 his desire to extract personal wealth from the then nonprofit OpenAI when he asked himself in the notes, "Financially what will take me to \$1B?"

In his deposition last year, Brockman said that he wrote that line as he was thinking through what would financially motivate him, were OpenAI to transition into a for-profit business. He said his first motivation was still to ensure OpenAI's mission could continue. In posts on X, he wrote, "I have great respect for Elon, but the way he cherry-picked from my personal journal is beyond dishonest."

Brockman and his wife became wealthy enough to be among the largest donors to MAGA Inc., a super PAC aligned with President Donald Trump, and to another fund that opposes regulation of AI, according to Federal Election Commission filings.

In another snippet from his diary, Brockman appears to muse that it would be improper to convert the company into a for-profit without including Musk. "it'd be wrong to steal the non-profit from him. ... that'd be pretty morally bankrupt. and he's really not an idiot."