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# The Tesla leaks: what it’s really like to work for Elon Musk

Oliver Moody reports on the whistleblowers who lifted the lid on the ‘cultlike hell’ of the electric car giant’s gigafactories — and the safety record it tried to keep secret



ILLUSTRATION BY PETER CROWTHER

Oliver Moody

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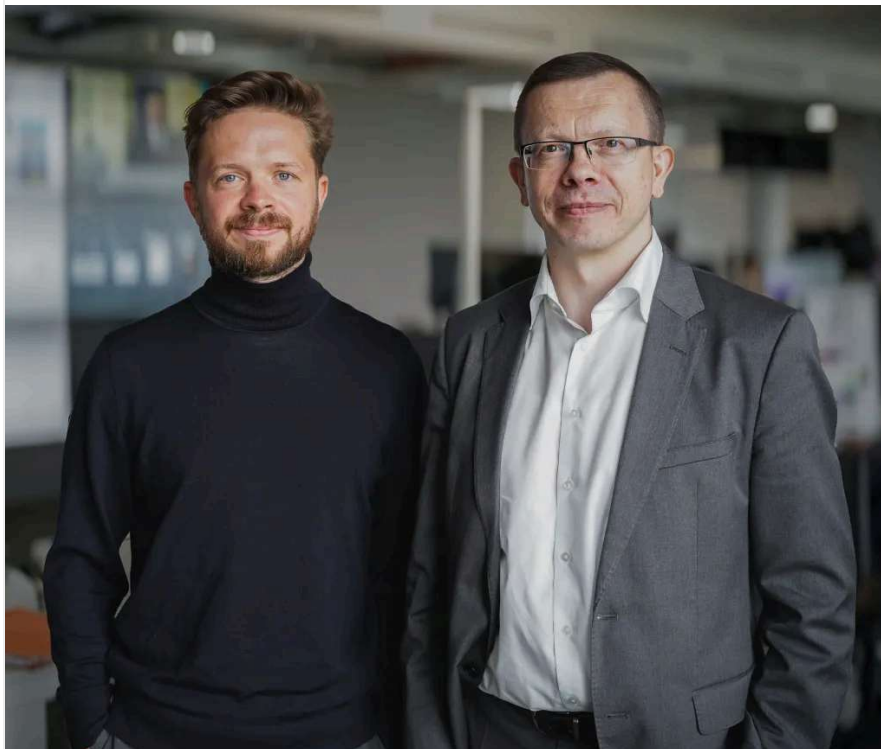
As the head of investigations at Germany’s leading business newspaper, Sönke Iwersen is well accustomed to dealing with red-herring tips provided by cranks, hostile investors and petty grudge-bearers.

But his rule is: “Never turn anyone away. Always listen.” It might just lead to something big.

This principle was thoroughly vindicated on November 4, 2022. An anonymous figure contacted Handelsblatt, Iwersen’s publication, offering to blow the whistle on what they said were serious problems inside [Tesla](#), the world’s most valuable carmaker. Within minutes of striking up contact through an encrypted app called Threema, the source had sent Iwersen a Microsoft Excel file that purported to contain the personal details of 5,000 people the company had laid off.

Seconds later came another database listing the names, email addresses, birth dates and social security numbers of 73,000 Tesla employees. Another had their salaries. It was everything a malicious actor would need to steal their identities, readily available to the most junior employee at the firm. A third item was simply titled: “Worst things we are doing to our customers.”

And so began the Tesla files, a trove of more than 23,000 documents from a trillion-dollar company that had previously drawn a Trappist veil of silence over its internal workings, which has now been retold in a book of the same name by Iwersen and his colleague Michael Verfürden, a reporter in his investigations unit.



The investigative journalists Michael Verfürden, left, and Sönke Iwersen

ALEXANDER VOSS

This was no ordinary corporate leak. It was a skeleton key to a shadowy world run like a personal fiefdom by the world’s wealthiest person, [Elon Musk](#). “It was by far the most important leak we’ve ever had at Handelsblatt,” Iwersen says from his office in Düsseldorf. Over the two and a half years he and his team have spent dissecting the files, Musk has forged a political alliance with [Donald Trump](#) and helped to propel him to the presidency with \$288 million (£220 million) in donations and copious support through X, his social media platform. He was then put in charge of the Department of Government Efficiency, pledged to chop \$2 trillion out of the federal budget and appeared in the Oval Office so frequently that he was nicknamed the president’s “first buddy”. That bromance is now over, but Iwersen and Verfürden recall looking on in “disbelief” as it played out.

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“However far we look back,” they write, “we find no precedent for what’s unfolding. Rockefeller, Ford, Morgan, Walton, the Koch brothers — all shaped politics in their time. But none of them ever installed a president. And then governed alongside him.”

For the German journalists, if you want to understand Musk you have to understand Tesla. The two are so intertwined that it is easy to forget he did not create the company. It was founded in 2003 by Martin Eberhard and Marc Tarpenning, a pair of American engineers based in Menlo Park, California. Musk barged in during its first funding round the following year, becoming chairman in return for investing \$6.4 million.

Originally the aim was to build a premium sports car, the Roadster, using the proceeds to take electric vehicles into the mainstream. After Musk launched a boardroom coup and became chief executive in 2008, though, its ambitions went

stratospheric. Ultimately, Musk said, he wanted to flood the world's streets and motorways with 20 million fully self-driving electric "robotaxis" that could be summoned at the tap of a phone screen, all but eliminating road accidents.

Not everyone shared this vision. In 2010 Tesla was saved from bankruptcy only by a generously termed \$465 million loan from the US Department of Energy. In 2018 it survived the heaviest short-selling attack in recent history, as investors bet against the company's stock price amid concerns over unattainable production targets. But today there are at least three million Teslas on the roads and the business is worth more than Ferrari, Mercedes-Benz, Volkswagen, BMW, Porsche, Ford and General Motors put together. Musk's \$127 billion of stock is loosely equivalent to the annual economic output of Ecuador or Kenya.

Yet the outside world knows remarkably little about what goes on at Tesla's six "gigafactories" — its plants in Nevada, New York, Brandenburg, Shanghai, Texas and Fremont, California. The firm employs more than 100,000 people, from developers and engineers to assembly line workers, but even former staff with an axe to grind have tended to be discreet. Circumspection is so ingrained that Tesla requires job applicants to sign a non-disclosure agreement before they are invited to their first interview.

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## The whistleblower

Handelsblatt's source, Lukasz Krupski, was one of many thousands who unreservedly bought into the Tesla hype. A gifted autodidact and self-avowed "Musk disciple", the Warsaw-born Krupski had been thrilled to get a job as a technician at Tesla's Drammen showroom in Norway, its biggest market in per capita terms, in 2018.



Musk, right, opens Tesla's 'gigafactory' in Brandenburg with the German chancellor Olaf Scholz, centre, in March 2022

ALAMY

Things went well at first. Krupski earned Musk's personal thanks for "saving" a car show by having the presence of mind to remove a burning power booster capsule from one of the vehicles moments before the curtain was lifted. But then he made the mistake of taking the company's professed culture of openness too literally. After he raised a catalogue of concerns with his managers — ranging from defects in Tesla's products to basic safety in the workplace and colleagues making sexist jokes — Krupski discovered that his superiors had installed spyware on his laptop.

He also realised that he could retrieve dizzying volumes of sensitive files from the firm's systems because no one had bothered to restrict the access permissions. By the time he was fired he had siphoned off more than 100 gigabytes of data.

- [Inside Elon Musk's first Tesla gigafactory in Germany](#)

Iwersen and his team initially struggled to believe the leak was real. It seemed more plausible that such a large cache of spreadsheets, videos and slideshows, many marked "secret" or "confidential", had been deepfaked than that one of the most valuable corporations on the planet had left them lying around for anyone to read.

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The deeper they delved, however, the more they found not only that every detail checked out, but also that the nuggets of personal information could be used to contact and make whistleblowers out of dozens of new sources at the company.

Iwersen, 54, founded Handelsblatt's investigations unit in 2012 and has won more national prizes than you can fit on a mantelpiece. Serious and measured, he has spent two thirds of his adult life forensically uncovering corporate wrongdoing. But the first months that he and Verfürden, 33, spent sifting through the Tesla files were on a different level. First thing in the morning, new documents would ping on to Iwersen's phone while he was slicing apples for his three children or checking their faces for stray splotches of toothpaste. At weekends he would switch his attention between his sons' football matches and handling the almost ceaseless flow of correspondence with Krupski and the Handelsblatt reporters. At one point a batch of files arrived while Verfürden and his family were unwrapping their Christmas presents.



President Trump admires a Tesla Model S with Musk at the White House in March. The president bought one in the same colour

## Musk: hero or indulged emperor?

*The Tesla Files* is inevitably, to some degree, a book about Musk himself. There is a heroic version of his story — the tale of the unsleeping genius who stalks the assembly lines in the small hours, personally reprogramming robot arms to speed them up, who once erected an entire vehicle production line in a car park within a week, using a slope to compensate for the lack of oomph in the conveyor belt. The Musk who invented the reusable rocket, treated himself for depression with horse tranquillisers and put a chip in a quadriplegic person's brain so they could control a computer mouse with their thoughts. The Musk whose core design principle is borrowed from his 19-year-old autistic son Saxon: “Why doesn't the future look like the future?”

*The Tesla Files* paints a different picture — one of a figure who resembles a Roman emperor flattered to the point of delusion by a court of flunkies. Nicknamed N1 (Number One) or Voyager (after the lonely space probe) by his minions, Musk is assiduously indulged in his whimsies but cushioned from unpleasant truths.

Invoices unearthed by the investigation suggest he is accompanied round the clock by bodyguards and minders who serve as his interface with the world: “They handle his travel, pay his hotel bills, shop for him, bring him medicine.”

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In 2015 Musk complained that the autopilot on his Tesla continually struggled with one section of his commute to the headquarters of SpaceX. The engineers concluded its cameras could not recognise a faded white line in the road. Rather than tell him so, they hired a line-painting machine and planned to shut down the road in the dead of night and redraw it

themselves, until they found a sympathetic official in the local transport department who did it for them in return for a tour of SpaceX.

Yet the real core of *The Tesla Files* is a triad of disclosures that might have destroyed a more conventional company.

## Sloppy data security

The first was that the files existed at all and could be downloaded by any member of staff who cared to look for them.

“How is it possible that a company like this and a guy [Musk] who pitches himself as a super-tech pioneer who knows all about data and how important data is would let that happen?” Iwersen says. This remains a mystery. One senior Tesla employee had already raised internal concerns and Musk himself had warned all staff to be “extremely vigilant” after a “quite extensive and damaging” leak by another worker in 2018. “We still don’t know why the data was available for everyone — if it was just sloppiness or if it was intentional, in order to be faster,” Verfürden says.

- [Tesla shares sink lower after Elon Musk launches America Party](#)

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It is conceivable that the casual approach to data protection may have broken the law, at least in the European Union. Yet the Dutch authorities, who are leading a multinational investigation, have yet to announce their findings more than two years after the first Handelsblatt report on the subject.

## The eighth circle of hell

The second revelation in the Tesla files was the noxious working conditions at the company. To some degree these had



already been an open secret. It was common knowledge that Musk would make his underlings recite a list of commandments, known as the Algorithm, that included the injunction: “Comradery is dangerous. It makes it hard for people to challenge each other’s work. There is a tendency to not want to throw a colleague under the bus. That needs to be avoided.”

Stories did the rounds about how staff had been ordered to wade through human waste after a sewage pipe burst at the original Tesla factory in Fremont. Musk openly referred to the firm’s manufacturing processes as a “production hell”, likening them to the eighth circle in Dante’s *Inferno*.



The assembly line at the Fremont facility in California

EYEVINE

Literarily minded readers may be aware that the eighth circle was reserved for those guilty of fraud, which is apt. According to the book Tesla treats many employees as frauds — loading them with huge volumes of work and then accusing them of faking it when they fall ill. That, says the book, is a large part of the reason why Tesla has such a high turnover of staff. It was typically turning over about 30 or 40 per cent of its workforce every year, the files disclosed, almost an order of magnitude higher than the rate of churn at some rival carmakers. In 2018 alone, the files suggested, roughly 70 per cent of Tesla employees had left and been replaced.

From the management’s perspective, these were the chaff that had been separated from the wheat: the idle, the hypochondriac and the faint-hearted who lacked the stamina to keep up with Musk’s “ultra-hardcore” work ethic. There was also a climate of intense suspicion. Krupski’s laptop was not the only one to have

Code42 spyware installed on it: the Handelsblatt journalists found that Tesla had bought 31,000 licences for the spyware in a six-month period. Other invoices showed the firm had hired former CIA and FBI officers to hunt down those who deviated from the company line.

There were plenty of workers who thrived in this swirl of cortisol and adrenaline, but many felt crushed by what they described as a climate of fear and mistrust. “It’s like a cult. A totally crazy world,” one German sales rep told the authors. Another worker at the Tesla gigafactory in Grünheide, near Berlin, characterised the atmosphere as “a mix between Henry Ford and Scientology”.

The Grünheide facility has become an infamous battleground between Musk, who dislikes organised labour, and Germany’s powerful trade unions. Staff frequently complain of working patterns that can be switched jarringly between night shifts and day shifts, leaving them exhausted. Conversely, supervisors suspect mutiny in the ranks. Last summer the plant manager caused an international stir when he accused the workforce of stealing 65,000 coffee mugs. When Handelsblatt broke this story last summer, it went viral — and it was the first time in more than a year of revelations that Musk deigned to respond. He joked on X that the company was being “mugged”.



The Brandenburg factory in Grünheide has been a focus of staff disputes against Tesla’s practices

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The conflict escalated when Tesla started sending inspectors round to the homes of workers who had called in sick and docking the pay of those who declined to get their doctors to tell the company what was wrong. Again, Musk gave a cursory reply on X: “This sounds crazy. Looking into it,” he tweeted.

The overseers wield the carrot as well as the stick: at the same time as Tesla's board tried to award Musk the largest corporate pay package in American history, every employee at the Berlin gigafactory was presented with a pair of company-branded red socks for Christmas. As if that were not recompense enough, they can also enrol for a weekly quiz on factory procedures. The first prize is a test drive of the local Tesla Cybertruck, which has apparently broken down twice on the plant's track.

## Serious safety breaches

That points to the third and biggest of the issues in the Tesla files. In 2013 Musk had promised to introduce a "fully self-driving" autopilot that would enable the cars to drive across the US while their owners snoozed. The first vehicles with rudimentary versions of the software were sold on the American market in 2015. The next year Tesla released a notorious video in which one of its vehicles appeared to autonomously trundle around the San Francisco Bay Area to the soundtrack of the Rolling Stones' *Paint It Black*, while the "driver" kept his hands near the steering wheel "for legal reasons".

It was already patently clear before the Tesla files that the company had fallen some distance short of fulfilling its vision. As Steve Wozniak, the co-founder of Apple, who bought a Tesla at the height of the autopilot hype in 2016, later put it: "It's not even close to reality. Boy, if you want a study of AI gone wrong... and trying to kill you every chance it can, get a Tesla."

What the Tesla files really showed was just how pervasive these problems were. Between 2015 and 2022 Tesla had logged more than 4,000 customer complaints about inappropriate braking and acceleration. Some of its own staff said internally that they had stopped using the autopilot because its caprices scared them. The "fully self-driving" version of the technology is not yet legal in Europe but Tesla owners can buy a more limited suite of "enhanced driver assistance" functions that take care of routine procedures such as parking or speed control on the motorway.

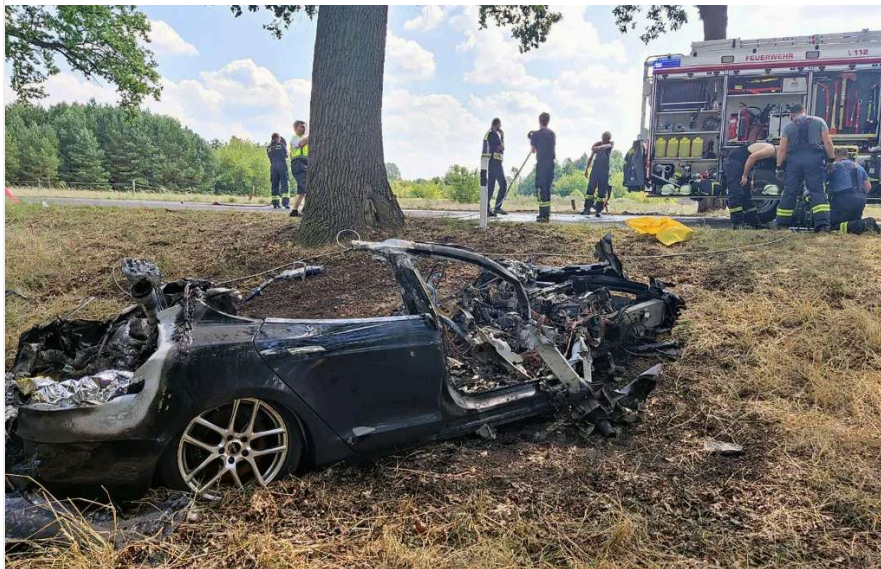
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It turned out, however, that several German courts had found even these tools were "indisputably unusable" and a "significant hazard in urban environments to the driver and surrounding traffic". In one case a pair of German 18-year-olds were burnt to death in the back seats of a Tesla after it crashed



into a tree in rural Brandenburg, outside Berlin. Firefighters had been unable to free them because the door handles — which the book says were designed to retract at Musk’s personal insistence, on aesthetic grounds — could not be released. The ADAC, the German equivalent of the AA, now advises all Tesla drivers to keep an emergency window-breaking hammer at hand for this kind of scenario.

This was the heart of the first Handelsblatt exposé in early 2023. It prompted several bereaved relatives of Tesla drivers to ask Iwersen and his team for help in finding out why the cars had crashed. These included the owner of a family-run timber business in southwest Germany, whose husband died when his Model S smashed into a barrier on a motorway near the Monte Ceneri tunnel through the Swiss Alps, flipping several times and landing more than 70 metres away. Several drivers stopped and tried to open the doors to free him, but could not. Even the firefighters who turned up 20 minutes later were unable to get in and had to watch as the car was consumed by flames.



The burnt-out wreckage of a Tesla in which two teenage passengers died after it struck a tree and caught fire in Brandenburg, Germany, 2022

ALAMY

Iwersen and Verfürden argue that Tesla has maintained an implicit policy of deliberately handing out as little information as possible about these faults. One internal document shows that staff are instructed only to provide the details “VERBALLY” (the company’s own capital letters) to customers.

Since Musk helped to propel Trump to the presidency, the accidents have been reclassified in the US so that the firm does not have to report about 12 per cent of the incidents involving its vehicles.

## What difference will it make?

But this line of inquiry leads back to the central question of the book and of Musk's career as a whole: does any of this make much difference? Iwersen and Verfürden note that Musk has embraced a Silicon Valley school of thought known as "longtermism", under the influence of the Scottish philosopher William MacAskill.

All decisions, by its logic, should be judged not by their consequences in the immediate future but by whether they will help the survival of the human race on a cosmological timeline of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of years. When Musk is asked about the accidents linked to the Tesla autopilot system, he often points out that 1.3 million people die in road accidents around the world each year. In his view, fixating on the handful of these deaths that may have been caused by his not-quite-self-driving cars is not just stupid but immoral. If the overarching mission is to build an automated system that eliminates car accidents altogether, then anyone who gets in the way is — as Musk puts it — "killing people".

That does not get him off the hook as far as Verfürden is concerned. "We think it's crucial to report just how much of a black box Tesla remains when it comes to crash data, despite Musk's own pledge to immediately disclose any critical crash data that affects public safety," he says.

If Musk is at all bothered by their reporting, he has largely kept it to himself. Over two years in which Handelsblatt has published dozens of stories based on the Tesla files and the resulting network of sources, they have had only a handful of responses from the company, usually in the form of letters from its lawyers.

Tesla does not have a press office and it has been a perennial struggle to find anyone at the firm willing to acknowledge a request for comment. "We want to be fair and present the full picture," Verfürden says. "It's unfortunate they've never acknowledged what actually happened."

Iwersen's theory is that Musk has deliberately refrained from commenting on the more serious revelations so as not to draw attention to them. Some of his supporters have been more aggressive, though. When Iwersen appeared on a German political talk show, he was subjected to a tirade on X by Naomi Seibt, a young far-right influencer who appears to be Musk's chief source of information about German politics and to have

kindled his enthusiasm for the hard-right Alternative for Germany party.

The Handelsblatt team’s meticulous exposure of the problems at Tesla has done nothing to obstruct the company’s rise. Its share price more than doubled over the two years after the first report, although it has lost a bit of ground since then after Musk had his brief flirtation with government and European consumers turned away from the brand en masse. Iwersen and Verfürden are unperturbed.

“I don’t feel good or bad if the stock goes up or down,” Verfürden says. “We’re just trying to provide actual information. We do feel like what you get from Mr Musk on X is not the full picture. And I think when you read the book, you have better information and you can decide for yourself.”

**The Tesla Files by Sonke Iwersen & Michael Verfurden (Penguin £22). To order a copy go to [timesbookshop.co.uk](https://timesbookshop.co.uk). Free UK standard P&P on orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members**

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