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Elon Musk venerated and employees spied on: inside the "hardcore" backstage of Grok
INVESTIGATION
Employee testimonies and a document detailing internal rules, consulted by "Libération," shed light on the functioning of xAI, the billionaire's AI parent company. A company where being fired for a tweet or working thirty-six hours straight is not unusual.

Under the blue sky of California, Jack[1] gives a hint of a melancholic smile. This American left a major Silicon Valley company to launch his startup. Free from any boss, the self-entrepreneur says he is happy, even if a pang of nostalgia sometimes seizes him. "*At my*

[1] First name has been changed

former employer, everything was extremely well organized," he tells *Libé* via videoconference. His colleagues formed a close-knit *"community."* The management was *"sensitive"* and *"accommodating,"* he describes. And concludes: *"It's the best company I've ever worked for."* The name of this Edenic garden? The artificial intelligence company xAI. Its creator: Elon Musk, far-right billionaire and former associate of Donald Trump.

Racism, antisemitism, sexism... Yet, when he worked for the richest man on Earth, Jack saw the company go from one bad buzz to another controversy. At the center of these skirmishes: Grok, the company's *"anti-woke"* and unbridled chatbot. This summer, the AI shocked by calling itself "MechaHitler" - after a character from the video game *Wolfenstein 3D* embodying a cyborg version of Adolf Hitler - flooding the X social network, to which it is integrated, with neo-Nazi remarks. A conspiracy theorist, it scandalized by claiming that electoral fraud prevented Donald Trump from once again accessing the presidency in 2020. Another scandal in early January: at the request of internet users, Grok undressed thousands of women. The last straw for the French authorities, who searched the Parisian offices of X and summoned Elon Musk for a hearing scheduled for April 20.
The Paris prosecutor's office struck again on Saturday by announcing that it had reported a possible *"artificial overvaluation"* of X and xIA companies to the US authorities. According to the public prosecutor's office, the deluge of pornographic *deepfakes* that occurred at the beginning of the year could be a strategy devised in anticipation of the merger between xAI and SpaceX, another Elon Musk company. The objective: to boost the future share prices of the new entity, whose stock market listing is scheduled for June. *"They are mentally disabled,"* posted the billionaire on X, addressing the French magistrates.

The controversies surrounding Grok are coming to light, but its backstage remains largely opaque. xAI, with its offices in San Francisco, London, or Memphis, is like a black box where the destinies of a thousand employees are made and unmade in silence. A safe valued at 200 billion dollars (173 billion euros) where the most talkative are silenced by ironclad confidentiality agreements. Of internal turmoil, only echoes are perceived: the departures of six out of eleven co-founders in two years, the abrupt dismissal of 500 "data annotators" in September. Internal surveillance, surprise searches, devotion to the "big boss"... Based on employee testimonies and the review of an internal document, *Libération* has been able to reconstruct part of the infernal machinery at work behind these closed doors.

WORK MARATHONS

Thus, a 70-page *"manual"* detailing the company's rules reveals an ambient paranoia. *"Without notice,"* xAI can conduct *"inspections"* of its assets. Lockers, phones, computers,

and vehicles included. It also reveals that it would be *"inevitable"* to expose a portion of the staff to *"very difficult or disturbing contents."* A warning intended for recruits responsible for data sorting, whose task is to review images and texts that may be violent or pornographic. Employment conditions, finally, are subject to extreme flexibility. Roles, hours, or salaries can be modified *"at any time"* and a *"refusal to work overtime"* can lead to dismissal.

"These rules shock you because you are French", jokes Jeffrey Hirsch, professor of law at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. *"In the United States, the base rule in the vast majority of states is that you can fire someone for any reason. Your boss doesn't like your haircut? You can be fired."* The only exceptions to this *"at-will"* employment regime are for discriminatory reasons of dismissal. At *Libé's* request, Jeffrey Hirsch reviewed certain excerpts from xAI's *"manual."* His conclusions? *"Nothing seems illegal."*

Nothing, not even these work marathons of more than twenty-four hours. Parsa Tajik, a member of the xAI technical team, recounted in November on X that he had *"worked for about thirty-six hours without sleeping."* Outrageous? Not for the employee, who boasted under the cheers of his colleagues. *"I have nothing against work-life balance. In fact, I recommend it to all our competitors,"* one of them ironically remarked. Intensive work, pushing oneself, sacrifices... At xAI, *"hustle culture"* (the idea that hyper productivity leads to success) has many adherents.

It must be said that this ideology has propelled the company among the AI giants in record time... despite its lag. In 2023, when Elon Musk launched xAI, the businessman was behind. Since last year, the successful bot ChatGPT is shaking up global economies. A humiliation for the CEO, who co-founded the company behind the program, OpenAI, before leaving it five years earlier. To catch up with his rival, the entrepreneur then deploys an unbeatable strategy: setting impossible deadlines for the xAI teams, composed of former Google or Meta employees. And ensuring they meet them.

Colossus, the seven-hectare supercomputer that allows Grok to function, was built in 120 days. Igor Babuschkin, co-founder of xAI, recalls on X the sleepless night spent in Memphis to resolve last-minute issues. *"We went to bed with the feeling of living the most exhilarating moment of our lives,"* he writes. Grok, on the other hand, was completed in a day and a half: *"Elon sent a message saying we would have to work extremely hardcore for the next thirty-six hours,"* describes Toby Pohlen, another co-founder of xAI, on X. The objective is met, *"without drugs, or even caffeine,"* but thanks to *"pure adrenaline."*

In Silicon Valley, do all geeks work so intensely? "*Absolutely not,*" affirms an employee of a

US tech giant. In her company, the environment is *"much more chill." "We don't work thirty-six hours straight,"* she assures. Moreover, in her circle, *"nobody wants to go to xAI."* A boycott that can be explained as much by the working conditions imposed by Elon Musk as by the products developed by his teams: "*xAI is perceived as a company that has no moral values and that is primarily looking to make money."* Her colleagues were particularly shocked by a feature developed by their competitor: sexual chatbots. In July, Elon Musk launched Ani, a young girl avatar inspired by manga that can have flirty conversations and even undress. *"Certainly, Grok's engineers, due to the intensity of their work, are capable of developing projects hyper-quickly... But for what purpose?"* she asks.

“NO MORAL COMPASS"

Real devotion or Stockholm syndrome? The cult of hyper productivity within xAI goes hand in hand with that of Elon Musk's personality. The megalomaniac is described with admiration. His *"obsessive sense of urgency,"* his *"critical thinking,"* even his *"humility"* are praised. *"He went to buy toilet paper for his employees during the pandemic, because nothing is beneath him,"* marvels a former employee, Katia Karpenko. His failures, abuses, and contradictions are forgiven. His ultra-partisan period with Trump and his undermining work with the former Doge, the Government Efficiency Department, an entity created to slash US federal spending? *"It's not support for Trump,"* Jack believes. *"He just seized the opportunity to optimize the government."* The minors undressed by Grok? *"That's not what he intended*," argues his former employee. *"Elon Musk has no moral compass in the way we understand it. He doesn't consider the risks. He simply thinks: 'Oh great, I can develop this technology, and it will improve the world.”*

This, according to him, is the whole objective of Grok, which claims to want to *"understand the true nature of the universe." "We combine the world's knowledge to allow humans to access absolute truth,"* swears Jack. The AI is regularly accused of echoing Elon Musk's positions, but the former employee denies it outright. Elon Musk himself presents Grok as an objective and uncensored AI, unlike ChatGPT, which he finds too politically correct. Ironically, internal xAI documents consulted by *Libération* show that the CEO does not give his employees the same freedom of expression as his chatbot. Facts and actions are controlled, both inside and outside the offices.

According to the rules dictated by the boss, self-proclaimed *"absolutist of freedom of expression,"* an employee must *"start from the assumption"* that what they do on social networks *"reflects on the company."* An element of xAI must be careful not to make any *"malicious statements"* and not to utter *"any threats"* online. The complete opposite of Elon

Musk, who tweets many provocative remarks. And what to do if a journalist contacts you? In that case, xAI, which did not respond to *Libé's* requests, dictates the response: *"No comment."*

xAI does not joke with these obligations. After a tweet in which he judged Grok to be less performant than ChatGPT, Benjamin De Kraker was given an ultimatum: delete his message or leave the company. Disgusted, the developer chose the latter. Sulaiman Ghori's misadventure is even more tragic. The young man raved about his work for nearly an hour in an interview posted on YouTube. He recounted anecdotes, including the time when Elon Musk bet an employee a Tesla vehicle if he could complete a difficult task in twenty-four hours. Bet won: *"I see his car from the window of our cafeteria,"* the technician amused himself. Four days later, without explanation, Sulaiman Ghori announced on X: *"I have left xAI."*

The company's surveillance does not stop at online publications. Its "manual" instructs its employees to have *"no expectation of privacy"* in their internal communications, whether it be their emails, social networks, or even their conversations. *"The company reserves the right to monitor, intercept, and/or examine all data transmitted via the company's computer resources and communication systems,"* it reads. Translation: *Big Brother is watching you*. If an engineer uses their personal computer, xAI reserves the right to *"inspect it"* to *"protect company data."* Worse: before going on vacation, employees must *"inform their manager of their travel destination,"* again for "*security" reasons*.

KITCHEN SECRETS

Excessive surveillance? *"The company seeks to protect its intellectual property,"* analyzes Pascale Longuet, an attorney admitted to the Paris and New York bars. The objective would be *"to minimize potential data leaks, including those that might be on employees' private phones or computers."* Vigilance is necessary in the midst of a brain war. To poach the best talents from their competitors, major AI companies spend fortunes. This can lead to the circulation of know-how but also trade secrets. In September, xAI thus filed a complaint against OpenAI and several former employees, suspected of having shared pieces of its code to competitors. A complaint rejected at the end of February, the court finding that the evidence presented was insufficient. In the eyes of Pascale Longuet, xAI's rules are therefore *"legal"* and *"normal."*

Not everyone shares this opinion, such as Andrew Elmore, a law professor at Boston University: *"I have never seen a company manual that grants the employer such broad*

authorization to consult private emails and social networks." According to him, xAI's conditions would contradict *"the Federal Stored Communications Act, which makes employer access to an employee's private communications conditional on the employee's consent*." Problem: xAI seems to make this consent mandatory to be hired. *"This could be challenged in court,"* believes Andrew Elmore. Unlike other Elon Musk companies, accounts of disatisfied employees at xAI remain rare. On several occasions, Tesla has been criticized by its employees. In 2023, six former X engineers sued Musk for trying to make them sleep in their offices. On the xAI side, only one co-founder publicly links his health problems to his work.

Suffering from Lyme disease, Greg Yang took a leave of absence to get treatment. On X, he speculates he contracted the disease - transmitted by tick bites - a long time ago but only developed symptoms after *"giving his all to build xAI and weakening his immune system."* His loved ones regret that he overworked himself so much. He has only one obsession: *"to solve this problem"* so that he can "*give even more*."