

Ayn Rand and leadership in the tech industry: the Twitter takeover and the disdain for communication and stakeholder principles

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Abstract

Purpose – Following his acquisition of Twitter, Elon Musk’s conduct towards journalists, employees and other stakeholders has been widely characterised as openly contemptuous. From the perspective of stakeholder and communication management theories, such leadership is problematic both normatively and in terms of organisational performance. However, Musk’s conduct is not simply a case of managerial failure but reflects a distinct managerial and normative orientation grounded in Ayn Rand’s *Objectivism*.

Design/methodology/approach – Using an interpretive approach, the article analyses Ayn Rand’s *Objectivism* as a management fashion, a political ideology and a value system embedded in platform governance and infrastructure. This lens illuminates how Objectivist principles align with Musk’s leadership of X (formerly Twitter) and, more broadly, with patterns of Silicon Valley platform governance – specifically through an emphasis on self-interest, resistance to regulation, rejection of altruism and an absolutist conception of free speech.

Findings – The analysis indicates that Musk’s actions align closely with Randian ideals. He can further be interpreted as an embodiment of Randian archetypes such as Howard Roark and John Galt – figures characterised by the rejection of obligations towards others and resistance to external interference. Rand’s influence thus emerges as a largely implicit but structurally significant force shaping leadership communication and governance norms in the tech industry.

Originality/value – The article advances an original interpretation of communication and management practices in the tech industry as a coherent normative alternative to prevailing communication and stakeholder ethics, grounded in key principles of Ayn Rand’s *Objectivism* – a philosophical strand largely overlooked in communication and stakeholder research, particularly in European scholarship.

Keywords Critical public relations, Objectivism, Ayn Rand, Communication management, Stakeholder management, Twitter, Platform research, Accountability

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

In 2023, under Elon Musk’s leadership, the Twitter platform, now known as X, set its automated response to media enquiries to a single emoji: “👁️”. When this attracted public attention, Musk responded ironically, stating that the reply would be changed to a looped message—“We will get back to you soon.” While this may appear trivial, it points to a broader pattern: Journalists and other critical stakeholders are treated with open disregard, in ways that run counter to established communication and stakeholder management principles.

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Communication management theories consistently emphasise dialogue, mutual understanding, and the alignment of organisational action with stakeholder expectations and societal legitimacy. In the two-way symmetrical model, Grunig and Hunt highlight dialogue and mutual understanding as both ethical requirements and strategic conditions for long-term success (Grunig and Hunt, 1984; see also Grunig, 1992; Grunig and Grunig, 2008). From a strategic communication perspective, Zerfass (2008) conceptualises corporate communication as aligning organisational goals with societal expectations to create value and legitimacy. From a Habermasian perspective, Burkart (2007) even argues that communication is ethically justified only when it serves mutual understanding rather than strategic self-interest.

More generally, research on social media platforms points to a persistent asymmetry in governance structures. Although Musk and other tech leaders frequently invoke normative ideals such as “community” and “free speech,” decision-making power remains highly concentrated within platform companies, with limited influence for those affected by their decisions, including users (Myers West, 2018). This marginalisation stands in tension with foundational principles such as Freeman’s (1984) stakeholder theory, which holds that organisational legitimacy—and, ultimately, long-term success—depends on sustained engagement with all individuals and groups affected by organisational actions (see also Freeman *et al.*, 2010).

This leads to the following question: How should the systematic disregard for communication and stakeholder management principles—understood as the ethical and strategic integration of stakeholder interests into organisational conduct—observed among Musk and many other tech leaders be interpreted? In other words, does this conduct reflect negligence, or an underlying orientation that downplays dialogue and the inclusion of stakeholders affected by the actions of tech companies and their leaders?

Research at the organisational level provides further context for this question. A growing body of work shows that technology companies such as Meta, Google, and xAI do not act negligently but pursue highly strategic approaches aimed at market dominance (Rohn, 2015; Jullien, 2011). For example, to limit regulatory exposure, they strategically position themselves as “tech” rather than “media” companies (Napoli and Caplan, 2017) and invoke platform “neutrality” (Gillespie, 2010), thereby framing their role in ways that minimise responsibility for content and its societal impacts, despite shaping public discourse at scale through algorithmic systems (Stockmann, 2022; Seipp *et al.*, 2024). Davidson and Locke (2025) further show that these positions are supported by strategically organised lobbying efforts to resist regulation. Overall, corporate conduct in this sector appears strategic, instrumental, and institutionally organised.

At the same time, the image of highly rational organisations contrasts with the erratic conduct and self-presentation of their leaders. Research shows that tech leaders are frequently portrayed as visionary figures. As Bojanic (2023, p. 405) notes, “Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, or Elon Musk have all been praised for their visionary personalities, which might eventually encourage a fusion of the CEO’s identity with the company’s identity.”

Musk, in particular, cultivates the image of a “magician of the twenty-first century,” presenting himself as a “paragon of magic and technological wizardry”—a visionary entrepreneur and even a civilisational saviour (Crاندall *et al.*, 2021). He framed his acquisition of Twitter not as a market-driven business decision, but as an ethical intervention to preserve “a common digital town square” and “protect democratic debate” (Musk, 2022a, b). At this level, Musk appears not merely as a business-driven investor but as a figure guided by higher-order moral claims.

These tensions—between ethically contested practices and claims of commitment to “free speech,” and between rational organisations and their charismatic leaders—suggest that this tech industry conduct may be grounded in normative ideals that diverge from established management theories. What appears contradictory from the perspective of management and communication ethics becomes more coherent when viewed through the lens of Ayn Rand’s *Objectivism*—a libertarian philosophy centred on radical individualism, self-interest,

unregulated capitalism, and minimal government intervention. Understanding the principles of Objectivism and their contemporary relevance helps explain how highly strategic, disciplined tech companies, such as xAI, can coexist with charismatic leadership, exemplified by Musk, and conduct that dismisses or even ridicules stakeholder interests. From a Randian perspective, dialogue, mutual understanding, and the creation of public value and legitimacy are neither ethical obligations nor contributors to organisational success; rather, they are rejected as illegitimate constraints on entrepreneurial freedom.

Rand's ideas and their relevance to the tech industry are well-documented rather than obscure. Popular and cultural accounts have repeatedly highlighted their influence. For example, [Rushkoff \(2022, p. 22\)](#) argues in *Survival of the Richest* that "Ayn Rand fantasies" underpin a mindset that allows tech elites to act as if they were free from broader moral obligations. Similarly, [Street \(2023\)](#) shows that representations of Silicon Valley in film are very aware of Randian worldviews. More broadly, Rand remains one of the most widely read and influential public intellectuals of the twentieth century (see also [Daub, 2020](#)). In a 1991 survey conducted by the *Library of Congress* and the *Book-of-the-Month Club*, *Atlas Shrugged* was ranked as the second most influential book in respondents' lives after the Bible ([Los Angeles Times, 1991](#)), and her ideas continue to be promoted through influential institutes and bestselling works (e.g. [Brook and Watkins, 2012](#)). In the title of her biography, *Goddess of the Market*, [Burns \(2009\)](#) captures Rand's extraordinary significance, portraying her as an intellectual icon of market liberalism and the American Right.

Despite this visibility in public discourse and the tech sector, Rand's influence has received little attention in European scholarship ([Brühwiler, 2021](#)), including in communication research. For example, Rand is virtually absent in the *Journal of Communication Management*, whereas other public intellectuals—such as Arendt (e.g. [L'Etang and Merckelsen, 2011](#)), Bourdieu (e.g. [Topić-Rutherford et al., 2025](#)), Freeman (e.g. [Schwägerl et al., 2024](#)), Habermas (e.g. [Buhmann et al., 2019](#)), Latour (e.g. [Verhoeven, 2008](#)), and Luhmann (e.g. [Hoffjahn, 2024](#))—are cited extensively. The same holds for key handbooks of public relations and communication theory, such as *Public Relations Theory III: In the Age of Publics* ([Botan and Sommerfeldt, 2023](#)) and *Public Relations and Social Theory: Key Figures, Concepts and Developments* ([Ihlen and Fredriksson, 2018](#)), where Rand is also absent.

This paper addresses this gap by examining the systematic disregard for communication and stakeholder management principles in the tech and platform sectors through the case of Elon Musk's transformation of Twitter into X. Building on a critical public relations perspective, the analysis foregrounds how power, ideology, and normative assumptions shape communication practices and stakeholder relations ([L'Etang, 2005](#); [Motion and Weaver, 2005](#); [Weaver, 2001](#)). It then advances a novel interpretation by linking these patterns of conduct to the principles of Ayn Rand's *Objectivism*, conceptualising them not as managerial failure but as a deliberate, ideological undertaking.

To develop this argument, the paper introduces Rand's Objectivism and examines its relevance to the tech industry through three complementary lenses: [Abrahamson's \(1996\)](#) concept of management fashion, [Žižek's \(1989\)](#) theory of ideology, and [Hallinan et al.'s \(2022\)](#) model of platform values. Together, these frameworks illustrate how Objectivist ideas circulate, gain traction, and shape organisational practices and platform governance. The analysis applies these insights to Musk's takeover of Twitter, interpreting his conduct and self-presentation as consistent with Randian ideals. Methodologically, the study adopts a conceptual approach, combining an engagement with relevant literature and a close reading of publicly available materials, including statements, tweets, interviews, and documented actions attributed to Musk.

Ayn Rand in Silicon Valley and the tech industry

As [Merrill \(2013, p. 86\)](#) notes, Ayn Rand is "arguably the modern thinker who best represents the egoistic stance in ethics." However, her philosophy has long been marginalised in academia. As [Brühwiler \(2021, p. 24\)](#) observes, her work has often been dismissed because it

is rooted in fiction and lacks the formal structure typically expected in academic philosophy. Nevertheless, her novels remain among the most widely read in the United States, and her later nonfiction writings articulate a defence of radical individualism and free-market capitalism. In this sense, Rand can be understood as a “public intellectual” with substantial political and cultural influence (Brühwiler, 2021, pp. 29–30). This raises two questions: What are the core principles of her philosophy, and why does it appeal to a large and devoted audience?

The three core principles of objectivism

Rand’s philosophy of *Objectivism* rests on three core principles. First, reason is paramount. In an interview with *Playboy*, Rand defined it as “a man’s tool of knowledge, the faculty that enables him to perceive the facts of reality,” adding that “to act rationally means to act in accordance with the facts of reality.” Emotions, she insisted, “are not tools of cognition” and “tell you nothing about the facts” (Rand, 1964a; see also Binswanger, 1986, p. 408). Merrill (2013) underscores her unwavering commitment to reason, noting her disdain for intuitivism, subjectivism, relativism, and emotion (p. 86).

Second, individualism is central to Rand’s philosophy. She argued that each person should pursue personal happiness as the highest moral purpose in life. This view stands in sharp contrast to collectivism and altruism, which she explicitly rejected: “The basic principle of altruism is that man has no right to exist for his own sake [...] and that self-sacrifice is his highest moral duty, virtue, and value” (Rand, 1982, p. 71; see also Binswanger, 1986, p. 4). For Rand, ethics are rooted not in obligation to others but in rational self-interest. As Merrill (2013) notes, this does not legitimise harmful selfishness but instead calls for individuals to act rationally and ethically within a “live and let live” framework (pp. 89–91). Nonetheless, a key implication of her thinking is that empathy is seen as misguided or even wrong when used as a moral guide. In this sense, moral evaluation shifts away from responsiveness to others and towards the protection of individual agency from external claims.

Third, Rand endorsed laissez-faire capitalism as the only moral social system. “When I say ‘capitalism,’” she wrote, “I mean a full, pure, uncontrolled, unregulated laissez-faire capitalism—with a separation of state and economics, in the same way, and for the same reasons as the separation of state and church” (Rand, 1964b, p. 32; see also Binswanger, 1986, p. 57). This normative stance grounds the rejection of regulation, including content moderation and user participation in platform governance.

The appeal of Ayn Rand to tech leaders and business elites

Rand’s influence is particularly evident in the tech, business, and finance sectors. As Duggan (2019), pp. xiii–xiv) shows, figures such as Jimmy Wales, Peter Thiel, Steve Jobs, John Mackey, Mark Cuban, John Allison, Travis Kalanick, and Jeff Bezos have publicly expressed admiration for her work. Alan Greenspan, Chair of the *Federal Reserve* from 1987 to 2006, was even part of Rand’s inner circle. This raises a central question: Why has Ayn Rand found such a receptive audience among Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and business elites?

Merrill (2013, pp. 91–92) argues that, although Rand’s ethics may appear “harsh and self-centred,” her emphasis on reason and individual excellence continues to resonate with business and tech leaders. However, while *Objectivism*’s core principles—radical individualism, self-interest, and free-market capitalism—may appeal to entrepreneurial audiences, they do not fully explain Rand’s influence. Explanations must, therefore, consider not only the ideas themselves, but also how they are communicated and embodied.

Walker (1999) attributes Rand’s appeal to her resonance with younger audiences drawn to radical ideas, as well as to her personal charisma as a self-promoter who cultivated a loyal following. At the same time, he offers a more critical perspective, characterising the Rand movement as cult-like; he views Rand as a guru whose dominance paradoxically undermined her emphasis on independent thought. As he notes, “No one dared to think for themselves . . . except Rand” (p. 23). This raises a central question: Why do tech leaders—typically associated

with independence and nonconformity—respond positively to a philosophy often described in such restrictive terms?

One answer lies in the way Rand redefines entrepreneurial identity. [Duggan \(2019, p. xv\)](#) suggests that she made “acquisitive capitalists sexy” by combining the pursuit of heroic individual achievement with a rejection of social obligation. This redefinition is most clearly expressed in Rand’s fiction.

- (1) *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) presents a dystopian America in which entrepreneurs and inventors withdraw from a society they perceive as overregulated and parasitic. Dagny Taggart, a railroad executive, struggles to preserve her company amid mounting government interference, while a group led by John Galt orchestrates a strike of society’s most productive minds.
- (2) In *The Fountainhead* (1943), architect Howard Roark—portrayed by Gary Cooper in the 1949 film adaptation—struggles against a society that resists his uncompromising architectural vision. When clients alter one of his designs without his consent, Roark destroys the completed building in an act of protest, defending what he sees as the inviolability of creative integrity. During the ensuing trial, he argues that a “creator” has the absolute right to realise their vision without external interference.

Both *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* depict societies in which conformity suppresses innovation, and the systematic obstruction of individual talent contributes to collective decline. In his study of “Silicon Valley cinema,” [Street \(2023\)](#) places Ayn Rand above thinkers, such as Hayek and Friedman, in terms of cultural influence, noting that her celebration of the lone genius strongly appeals to tech leaders who see themselves as visionary outsiders. “Rand’s lauding of individual genius is highly seductive for the often self-absorbed, socially awkward, and highly individualist tech evangelists in Silicon Valley” (p. 4). Shaped by masculine norms and reinforced by Hollywood portrayals, these narratives cast tech founders as modern-day Roarks and Galts—exceptional figures destined to reshape the world ([Street, 2023, p. 34](#)). According to [Daub \(2020\)](#), this ideal of the uncompromising genius has deeply shaped Silicon Valley’s self-image, primarily through popular culture.

Conceptualising objectivism in the tech industry

While Rand’s influence is visible in the self-understanding and practices of tech leaders, these observations remain largely descriptive. To understand this influence more systematically requires a theoretically grounded approach. This section examines the role of *Objectivism* through three complementary lenses: first, as a management fashion circulating among business elites; second, as a political ideology shaping leadership worldviews; and third, as an implicit value system embedded in the design and governance of digital platforms.

Objectivism as a management fashion

The popularity of Ayn Rand among tech leaders can be understood through [Abrahamson’s \(1996\)](#) concept of “management fashion,” defined as a transitory collective belief that a particular idea promotes rational management progress (p. 257). From this perspective, *Objectivism* functions less as a coherent philosophical system than as a legitimising frame for rational self-interest, wealth creation, and resistance to regulation.

[Abrahamson \(1996\)](#), drawing on neo-institutionalism ([Meyer and Rowan, 1977](#)) and the production-of-culture perspective ([DiMaggio and Hirsch, 1976](#); [Hirsch, 1972](#); [Peterson, 1976](#)), emphasises that such ideas are actively produced, packaged, and diffused by “fashion setters,” including gurus, media, and business institutions (p. 266). Rand’s influence fits this pattern. She operated as a charismatic figure, while supporters such as Alan Greenspan helped confer institutional legitimacy ([Walker, 1999](#)). Her ideas have been further amplified through

popular media and contemporary business discourse (e.g. [Brook and Watkins, 2012](#)), where they are translated into accessible and appealing narratives.

Moreover, [Abrahamson's \(1996\)](#) concept of management fashion helps explain the appeal of *Objectivism* as shaped by broader “socio-psychological and technoeconomic forces” (p. 265). Under the technoeconomic conditions of digital capitalism—characterised by winner-takes-all dynamics, extreme wealth concentration, and scalable platform models—a philosophy that emphasises entrepreneurial success and rejects external constraints becomes particularly attractive from a sociopsychological perspective.

In this context, *Objectivism* has become a management fashion because it functions both as an ethical doctrine and as a marketable managerial idea, shaped and spread by influential actors and reinforced by the institutional and cultural logics of the platform economy. In the tech industry, where economic success is closely tied to narratives of innovation and disruption, *Objectivism's* core principles—together with Rand's celebration of individual heroism—align with these conditions by providing a normative framework that legitimises them.

Ayn Rand as a political ideology

While [Abrahamson's \(1996\)](#) concept helps explain the diffusion and appeal of *Objectivism* among tech leaders, it risks underestimating its political scope. Rand's philosophy is not merely a transient managerial idea but is more accurately understood as a political ideology. The concept of ideology has been widely discussed in social theory. [Žižek \(1989\)](#) defines it as a structure that shapes how we perceive reality, often making distorted worldviews appear natural. In *The Actuality of Ayn Rand*, [Žižek \(2002\)](#) critiques *Objectivism* as a radical form of capitalist individualism that elevates self-interest to a moral virtue. He argues that it promotes the belief that self-interest benefits society, while in practice it can contribute to social inequality and alienation. This is evident, for instance, in the work of [Brook and Watkins \(2012\)](#), who advocate a Randian “free market revolution” and present wealth not as something to be justified but as a moral accomplishment in itself:

Stop demonizing the rich, big business, and the profit motive—and stop defending them on the grounds of the service they render the poor or society. Recognize that growing richer requires no justification other than man's right to make the most of his time on earth. And if you are rich and successful, stop apologizing for your wealth—if you earned it, it is a moral achievement ([Brook and Watkins, 2012](#), p. 220).

Although Žižek has been criticised for his narrative-driven and eclectic style, his analysis is useful for understanding the political dimension of Rand's philosophy. From this perspective, *Objectivism* can be seen as a political ideology that presents self-interest as morally superior, normalises economic inequality, and reframes social obligations and responsibilities to others as illegitimate or even as something evil.

Objectivism as an infrastructural value system

The previous sections analysed *Objectivism* at two scales: the personal scale, as a management fashion that attracts tech leaders; and the cultural scale, as a political ideology rejecting expectations of public value and social welfare. Drawing on [Hallinan et al. \(2022\)](#), this analysis extends to the infrastructural scale of platform governance. Their framework distinguishes platform values along two dimensions: scale (personal, cultural, infrastructural) and explicitness (explicit, implicit, invisible). Therefore, it enables to analyse *Objectivism* as a value system that operates across three scales while varying in explicitness—from explicit to implicit to invisible—particularly within the design and governance of digital platforms.

From this perspective, *Objectivist* principles—such as rational self-interest, resistance to regulation, and the prioritisation of individual goals—operate not only as explicit beliefs or

cultural narratives but also as implicit or invisible logics shaping how platforms function and govern interaction. This distinction is also evident in platform policy documents, where values such as “community” or “free speech” are explicitly articulated but often framed in ways that shift responsibility to users and align with corporate interests (Hallinan *et al.*, 2022; Scharlach *et al.*, 2024). These values gain traction not necessarily through deliberate philosophical commitment but because they align with the economic and strategic interests of platform owners, who prioritise efficiency, scalability, and minimal external oversight. Platforms such as X and Facebook, for example, are designed to optimise engagement, virality, and data extraction rather than public accountability or user well-being.

In this context, limited intervention in content moderation and the invocation of radical “free speech” reflect a structural preference for minimal regulation, enacted through what Hallinan *et al.* (2022, p. 205) describe as “systemic and values-laden design.” This alignment does not imply that platform companies consciously adopt Rand’s philosophy. Rather, the structural logic of digital capitalism converges with *Objectivist* values, as both prioritise autonomy, self-interest, and limited oversight. As Hallinan *et al.* (2022) suggest, platform values are not primarily expressed through explicit statements but through infrastructural features that normalise autonomy, profit, and efficiency as default conditions.

Objectivism versus communication and stakeholder ethics

The preceding analysis has shown how *Objectivism* can operate across personal, cultural, and infrastructural scales in the tech industry. This raises a fundamental question: How do Randian principles relate to established normative frameworks in communication and stakeholder research?

Despite their differences, foundational approaches in communication and management research—particularly the theories of Freeman (1984), Grunig and Hunt (1984), and Zerfass (2008)—share a common premise: Organisational success depends on ethical and strategic responsiveness to others. Although they use different concepts—such as dialogue, mutual understanding, stakeholder integration, and legitimacy—they all emphasise the need to recognise and address the interests and expectations of others.

- (1) Freeman *et al.* (2010) emphasise the human dimension of business: “Businesses are human institutions populated by real-life complex human beings. Stakeholders have names and faces and children” (p. 29).
- (2) Grunig and Grunig (2008) conceptualise public relations as “a bridging role” between organisations and their publics, grounded in the normative aim “that societies around the world need to become more harmonious” (p. 342).
- (3) Zerfass (2008) conceptualises corporate communication as aligning business goals with societal expectations, ensuring that “the pursuit of market goals does not bring with it the infringement of legal or moral norms” (p. 67).

In this respect, communication and stakeholder ethics stand in clear contrast to *Objectivism*. Communication and stakeholder approaches view the organisation as embedded in a network of relationships, where legitimacy and business success depend on responsiveness and dialogue. *Objectivism*, by contrast, treats the organisation as an island in a “live and let live” world—self-sufficient, guided by its own goals, and fully detached from the expectations and claims of others.

The analysis so far suggests that the disregard for communication and stakeholder management principles by Musk and other tech leaders should not be interpreted as negligence. Rather, it may reflect *Objectivism* as a normative framework, which fundamentally challenges the normative core of communication and stakeholder theories.

Elon Musk as a Randian figure: a case study of Twitter's transformation into X

To examine this interpretation, this chapter presents a case study of Elon Musk and his transformation of Twitter into X. It analyses how Rand's *Objectivism* may manifest in organisational and leadership conduct. Building on the preceding analysis of *Objectivism* as a management fashion, political ideology, and infrastructural value system, it becomes clear that it is not only a set of abstract principles but also a cultural phenomenon, developed in *The Fountainhead*, *Atlas Shrugged*, and Rand's nonfiction, such as *The Virtue of Selfishness*. Rand rejects collectivism and enforced altruism and centres on values grounded in the belief that "one lives for his or her own sake and never sacrifices self to others or others to self" (Merril, 2013, p. 90).

These ideas are embodied in Rand's fictional protagonists, such as Howard Roark and John Galt. Against this backdrop, the analysis asks whether Elon Musk can be understood as a Randian hero, such as Roark or Galt, for his leadership during the transformation of Twitter into X.

This question has previously been discussed, particularly in popular, mostly non-academic and Randian-oriented debates. For example, Sitt (2019), writing for the self-proclaimed *Atlas Rising Institute*, argues that Musk's views closely reflect the values in *Atlas Shrugged*. By contrast, Camplin (2020), writing in the *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*, challenges this view by highlighting a central contradiction:

Elon Musk, for example, is listed as having been deeply influenced by Rand, and his accomplishments and vision are presented in a positive light. However, Musk is also well-known for seeking out government subsidies for many of his projects—and receiving billions to boot. He's hardly the only one (Camplin, 2020, p. 422).

This tension has also been debated in online forums such as Reddit's *Objectivism* community, where one user posed the question: "What is your take on Elon Musk, the most Randian hero who ever lived?" (Reddit User, 2023). Another responded: "Saying that Musk is anti-Objectivism because Tesla took government subsidies is dumb. His stance there was 'if you can't beat them, join them,' but he has said 100s of times there should be no subsidies" (Reddit User, 2023).

Such exchanges show that the question of whether Musk can be understood as a Randian figure is actively debated beyond academia. While these interpretations highlight relevant tensions, they remain largely anecdotal and lack systematic analysis, revealing a research gap. The present case study addresses this gap by comparing the positions and conduct of Musk and Rand across four topics: free speech, self-sacrifice, the creator as a driver of progress, and Musk's embodiment of the Randian figure.

Rand and Musk on free speech

Ayn Rand regarded freedom of speech as a fundamental individual right. In *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964b), she argued that free expression is indispensable to intellectual independence. In *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (1967), she further connected this principle to the defence of capitalism and resistance to authoritarian control. As Rand (1964b) emphasised, however, freedom of speech does not entail an obligation for others to provide the means of expression:

The right of free speech means that a man has a right to express his ideas without danger of suppression, interference, or punitive action by the government. It does not mean that others must provide him with a lecture hall, a radio station or a printing press (Rand, 1964b, p. 97).

Elon Musk has likewise positioned himself as a "free speech absolutist" (Musk, 2022a, b, March 5). In one tweet, he declared: "Free speech is the bedrock of democracy. That's why it's the FIRST Amendment. Without free speech, all is lost" (Musk, 2022a, b). In this context, he framed his acquisition of Twitter as an effort to preserve humanity:

The reason I acquired Twitter is because it is important to the future of civilization to have a common digital town square where a wide range of beliefs can be debated in a healthy manner [...] That is why I bought Twitter. I didn't do it because it would be easy. I didn't do it to make more money. I did it to try to help humanity, whom I love. And I do so with humility, recognizing that failure in pursuing this goal, despite our best efforts, is a very real possibility (Musk, 2022a, b).

Following the acquisition, Musk moved to reduce content moderation, which he regards as a form of censorship—to a minimum. In a November 2024 appearance on *The Joe Rogan Experience*, one of the most widely streamed podcasts globally, he further criticised this practice:

I think it may be just like, you know, whoever's in power kind of doesn't want the, you know, the other side hurt. [...] They use words like, 'Oh, we have to be against hate speech and misinformation,' but these are propaganda words. [...] The whole point of the First Amendment is like, do not trust the government.

Freedom of speech is the bedrock of democracy. Once you lose freedom of speech, you lose democracy. Game over. That's why I bought Twitter (Musk to Rogan, 2024).

By mid-2023, Musk had nuanced this position, adopting the formula “freedom of speech, not freedom of reach” (Newman, 2023, May 18), which has since been incorporated into X's official policy. As the platform states:

We believe Twitter users have the right to express their opinions and ideas without fear of censorship. These beliefs are the foundation of Freedom of Speech, not Freedom of Reach—our enforcement philosophy, which means, where appropriate, restricting the reach of Tweets that violate our policies by making the content less discoverable (X, April 17, 2023).

Musk's position and X's platform policy thus align with Rand's view that free speech protects individuals from state interference but does not entail the right to amplification or access to a platform.

This reduction in content moderation was followed by a documented increase in hate speech and harmful content on the platform (Hickey et al., 2023). However, within the logic of Rand and Musk, free expression is treated as fundamental and not conditional on its social consequences, even when it facilitates harmful or misleading content.

This position challenges communication and stakeholder ethics that treat freedom of expression as a qualified right—one that must be balanced to protect others and prevent harm.

Rand and Musk on self-sacrifice

A central aspect of Rand's philosophy is her rejection of altruism as a moral principle. She consistently criticised the idea that individuals should place others' needs above their own. As she argued, “Altruism is incompatible with freedom, and capitalism, and with individual rights. One cannot combine the pursuit of happiness with the moral status of a sacrificial animal” (Rand, 1964b, p. 127; see also Binswanger, 1986, p. 9). Although Rand acknowledged kindness toward others, she rejected self-sacrifice as a moral ideal. As she clarified:

Do not confuse altruism with kindness, good will or respect for the rights of others. These are not primaries, but consequences, which, in fact, altruism makes impossible. The irreducibly primary of altruism, the basic absolute, is self-sacrifice—which means: self-immolation, self-abnegation; self-destruction—which means: the self as a standard of evil; the selfless as a standard of the good. (Rand, 1982, p. 74; see also Binswanger, 1986, p. 5).

In this sense, her critique is not directed at concern for others as such, but at the idea that individuals have a moral obligation to subordinate their own interests to those of others:

Even though altruism declares that “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” It does not work that way in practice. The givers are never blessed; the more they give, the more is demanded of them [...]

Altruists are concerned with those who suffer—not with those who provide relief from suffering, not even enough to care whether they are able to survive (Rand, 1973, p. 13; see Binswanger, 1986).

Elon Musk expresses a similar position but frames it in terms of “empathy” rather than altruism. He has repeatedly described empathy as a potential threat to individual freedom and societal stability. In *The Joe Rogan Experience*, he outlined what he sees as the dangers of excessive empathy:

Mm. Like, if there's, like, there's so much empathy that you actually suicide yourself. [...] So that we've got civilizational suicidal empathy going on. And it's like, I believe in empathy. Like, I think you should care about other people, but you need to have empathy for civilization as a whole and not commit to a civilizational suicide. Also, don't let someone use your empathy against you so they can completely control your state and then do an insanely bad job of managing it and never get removed. The fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy. The empathy exploit. They're exploiting a bug in Western civilization, which is the empathy response. And I think empathy is good, but you need to think it through and not just be programmed like a robot (Musk on Rogan, 2024).

Rand's argument that altruism leads to the self-sacrifice of those who could alleviate suffering—and thereby to greater overall suffering—closely parallels Musk's claim that exploited empathy leads to “civilizational suicide.”

This position stands in tension with communication and stakeholder ethics, which emphasise responsiveness to stakeholders who “have names and faces and children” (Freeman et al., 2010, p. 29), conceptualise communication as a “bridging role” aimed at making societies more “harmonious” (Grunig and Grunig, 2008, p. 342), and require that business activities do not lead to “the infringement of legal or moral norms” (Zerfass, 2008, p. 67).

Musk and Rand on the creator as a driver of progress

A recurring theme in Rand's work is the moral elevation of the creator—the individual whose rational vision and uncompromising productivity drive civilisation's progress. In *The Fountainhead*, she let Howard Roark say in his famous defence speech at court:

Throughout the centuries there were men who took first steps down new roads armed with nothing but their own vision. [...] The great creators—the thinkers, the artists, the scientists, the inventors—stood alone against the men of their time. Every great thought was opposed. [...] No creator was prompted by a desire to serve his brothers, for his brothers rejected the gift he offered and that gift destroyed the slothful routine of their lives. His truth was his only motive. [...] The creator served nothing and no one. He lived for himself. [...] [T]he mind is an attribute of the individual. There is no such thing as a collective brain. (Rand, 1943, p. 710f).

In this excerpt, society punishes the exceptional not because of fear or distraction but out of envy and moral condemnation—a central theme in Rand's novels, including *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*.

In 2018, Musk tweeted about the potential human colonisation of Mars in the near future: “Engineers, artists and creators of all kinds. There is so much to build” (Musk, 2018). In April 2023, writer Josh Dholani posted a tweet. An iconic photograph of a young Ayn Rand accompanies the tweet, asserting:

Only Ayn Rand was smart enough to predict that incompetence and an ENVY for excellence will lead to dystopian social outcomes. Orwell thought we'd need total mind control, Huxley thought we'd need a permanently drugged populace, but Rand knew: all you need is resentment (Dholani, 2023).

Musk (2023) responded to this tweet:

Orwell was right → schools and media

Huxley → public is heavily medicated

Rand was also right, as you say (Musk, 2023a, b, April 23).

In another tweet Musk posted a meme version of “The Impossible Dream,” a song that portrays a lone hero pursuing an idealistic quest against overwhelming odds. The original tweet has 16 lines, some of the lines are:

To fight the unbeatable foe 🦸
To run where the brave dare not go 🏃
To reach the unreachable ⭐
This is my quest, to follow that 🏹
To be willing to march into 🌌 for a 🧡 cause
And I know if I'll only be true to this glorious quest 🗡️
And 🌍 will be better for this (Musk, 2023a, b, March 17)

Musk presents himself as a solitary figure engaged in a heroic struggle (“fight the unbeatable foe”), driven by visionary ambitions (“reach the unreachable”) and acting on his own judgement against opposition, while framing his actions as advancing civilisation (the world “will be better”). This characterisation closely resembles Rand’s protagonists, John Galt and Howard Roark, who are portrayed as uncompromising individuals guided by personal conviction and responsible for societal progress.

This position challenges communication and stakeholder ethics, which do not treat opposition or “resentment” as evidence of being an exceptional, envied creator, but as signals that require reflection and adjustment. Rather than endorsing an uncompromising stance, these approaches emphasise dialogue, mutual understanding, and responsiveness to criticism as essential for legitimacy and effective decision-making (Burkart, 2007; Grunig and Grunig, 2008; Freeman *et al.*, 2010; Zerfass, 2008).

Musk as a Randian figure

A central element of Rand’s philosophy is the figure of the uncompromising creator, whose motivation is grounded in internal conviction rather than external approval. Characters, such as Howard Roark and John Galt, embody this ideal. They do not adapt to others but follow an independent vision and, in doing so, are portrayed as drivers of human progress.

Musk’s public persona closely reflects this model. His pursuit of high-risk technological ventures, his defiance of regulations, and his emphasis on product over process present him as an independent actor guided by a personal vision. As shown in this section, Musk not only speaks in ways that resemble these characters but also acts accordingly.

A striking example followed Musk’s acquisition of Twitter: Content moderation was significantly reduced, which was accompanied by an increase in hate speech and misinformation. As a result, advertisers withdrew from the platform due to concerns about brand safety. Musk’s response to these pressures, particularly at the *New York Times* DealBook Summit in November 2023, further illustrates this stance. He reacted to advertiser boycotts with an explicit rejection of external pressure.

Andrew Ross Sorkin: “There was all of the criticism, there were advertisers leaving. [. . .]”

Elon Musk: “I hope they stop. Don’t advertise.”

Sorkin: “You don’t want them to advertise?”

Musk: “No.”

Sorkin: “What do you mean?”

Musk: “If somebody’s going to try to blackmail me with advertising, blackmail me with money; go fuck yourself.”

Sorkin: “But—”

Musk: “Go fuck yourself. Is that clear? I hope it is. [. . .]”

Sorkin: “Well, let me ask you then.”

Musk: “That’s how I feel. Don’t advertise.”

Sorkin: “How do you think then about the economics of X? If part of the underlying model, at least today—and maybe it needs to shift. Maybe the answer is it needs to shift away from advertising—if you believe that this is the one part of your business where you will be beholden to those who have this view—”

Musk: “GFY.”

This speech act closely mirrors Rand’s portrayal of principled, uncompromising protagonists. In *The Fountainhead*, Howard Roark expresses this stance succinctly: “The creator lives for his work. He needs no other men. [. . .] The basic need of the creator is independence. [. . .] To a creator, all relations with men are secondary” (Rand, 1943, p. 712). Needless to say, Musk’s “go fuck yourself” statement directed at advertisers—one of the platform’s most important stakeholders—stands in clear tension with communication and stakeholder ethics.

Conclusion and discussion

This paper addresses the question of how the systematic disregard for communication and stakeholder management principles by Musk and other tech leaders should be interpreted. Drawing on *Objectivism* as a management fashion (Abrahamson, 1996)—a political philosophy that presents self-interest as morally superior and justifies radical economic inequality (Žižek, 2002) and serves as a value system embedded in platform infrastructures (Hallinan et al., 2022)—the analysis shows that this conduct is not simply negligence. Rather, it reflects a coherent normative orientation: Rand’s *Objectivism*.

Rand’s core principles—reason, radical individualism, and laissez-faire capitalism—are reflected in Musk’s positions on radical free speech, his rejection of empathy, and his elevation of visionary creators as drivers of progress. Taken together, these elements form a structured value system that shapes governance at X, including the principle of “freedom of speech, not freedom of reach” and a minimisation of content moderation.

Musk’s management and communication practices and the appeal of Rand’s ideas among many other tech and business leaders challenge a core assumption of communication management and stakeholder theory: that organisations must recognise and address the interests and expectations of others. Instead, the analysis reveals a clear tension between Rand’s *Objectivism* and the strategic and normative assumptions of Grunig and Grunig (2008), Freeman (1984), Zerfass (2008), Burkart (2007) and many others.

Against this backdrop, the “poop emoji” response to media enquiries on X should not be understood merely as provocation or poor judgement. Rather, it reflects a set of Randian values, including an admiration for strong, autonomous leaders who reject external constraints. In this sense, the Randian ideal of the uncompromising, self-sovereign leader is enacted in practice. Rushkoff (2022) captures this logic succinctly, arguing that “by combining a distorted interpretation of Nietzsche with a pretty accurate one of Ayn Rand,” tech leaders come to believe that “the Übermensch of the future can use pure reason—objectivism—to rise above traditional moral constraints and remake the world ‘in his own interests’” (p. 78). Daub (2020) similarly critiques, drawing explicitly on Rand, what he calls the “genius cult,” in which entrepreneurs are portrayed as heroic individuals uniquely equipped to solve societal problems.

The central implication of this paper, therefore, is that the tension between communication and stakeholder theories and an *Objectivist* worldview is not a misunderstanding, but a fundamental conflict of values. Communication and stakeholder approaches view organisations as embedded

in networks of relationships—and more broadly in society—where legitimacy and success depend on responsiveness and dialogue. In this sense, Objectivist principles align with digital capitalism, where platforms operate at a transnational scale.

This study has limitations. It adopts an interpretive approach based on publicly available materials rather than systematic empirical data and relies on an ideal-typical representation of Musk. It, therefore, does not account for other possible influences, nor does it claim that Objectivism is the only explanatory framework. Other ideological currents may also shape leadership and platform governance in Silicon Valley. Future research should investigate competing influences and pursue empirical inquiry—through interviews, ethnographic research, or policy analysis—to test and refine the propositions advanced here. Comparative designs could examine whether similar leadership scripts appear across different platforms, regulatory environments, and cultural contexts, or whether the Randian repertoire is particularly salient under certain ownership and governance structures.

Despite its limitations, this article depicts how Rand's ideas have permeated—and now actively shape—the digital communication infrastructures that organise contemporary public discourse. Rather than ignoring these provocative ideas, the article calls on scholars and practitioners in communication management, stakeholder relations, and platform governance to respond with conceptual clarity, normative argument, and empirical scrutiny.

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