

The Tesla Influencers Leaving the Cult

This month, [Tesla customers](#) erupted in outrage over what some called a “[bait and switch](#)” by the [electric vehicle](#) manufacturer.

Initially, the company had offered to transfer the Full [Self-Driving](#) feature, which is now only available through a subscription model but could once be purchased for a “lifetime” fee that ran as high as \$15,000, to any new Tesla purchased by March 31.

The deal was most tempting for drivers already enticed by a new base Cybertruck model that cost just \$59,990, a price that CEO [Elon Musk](#) soon clarified would only last for [10 days](#), leaving potential buyers a very small window to make up their minds. (When first launched in November 2023, the cheapest Cybertrucks were \$60,990, but by the beginning of 2026, the cost of the entry-level model went up to \$79,990.)

Then Tesla quietly amended the language of the FSD transfer agreement, stipulating that customers would need to take delivery of a Tesla by March 31 in order to swap their FSD from their last vehicle to the next. With Tesla’s current production backlogs, that meant many people were committed to buying cars that would arrive too late to make the swap. The company gave buyers the option to cancel delivery and receive a refund of the \$250 order fee.

On [X](#)—which Musk owns and frequently uses, making it a favored social media platform for Tesla enthusiasts—the community was livid. “Tesla still hasn’t fixed their blatant FSD Transfer lies for the \$59k Cybertruck,” [fumed](#) the author of an account called The Cybertruck Guy, which is focused on the polarizing steel-paneled EV. “What a pathetic disaster.”

Such comments are not taken lightly in the Tesla bubble, where insufficient fealty to the brand or Musk can be taken as an attempt to sabotage either. Another Tesla influencer [screenshotted](#) Cybertruck Guy’s post to say: “Disappointing to see what I thought as respectable tesla accounts calling Tesla ‘liars’. Time to block these morons.” Of this exchange, another major Tesla booster [chimed in](#) to add: “Crazy to block people over this, but I don’t need to be involved with people that want to worship a corporation and say they can do no wrong.”

Long before Musk bought Twitter and turned it into X, it was an ideal gathering space for investors and customers of his car company.

There, they could follow him for updates about what was coming down the pipeline while expressing admiration for his supposed genius, continuously hyping each other up about the [environmental benefits](#) of EVs and the future of autonomous vehicles.

Those who own shares of Tesla are rarely shy about their financial incentive to engage in this echo chamber—over the past six years, Tesla stock has increased approximately tenfold in value, giving the company a market capitalization of well over a trillion dollars. Yet as the recent FSD transfer uproar demonstrates, people have their breaking points, and you can never know which unfulfilled promise (or [ill-advised actions](#) from Musk) will cause a Tesla fanatic to rethink their entire worldview. Then comes a difficult decision: Are they going to take their objections public and face exile from a hardened group that no longer tolerates such dissent? For those who decide to leave the fold, going on to challenge the aggrandizing narratives about Tesla and Musk can come to feel like a relief—and a duty.

For [Earl Banning](#), a psychologist in Anchorage, Alaska, the process of breaking ranks from the Tesla gang was a gradual one.

Banning joined Twitter in 2018 after buying his first Tesla, in order to keep up with everything Musk shared about the direction of the company. Early on, he tells WIRED, he had the idea of demonstrating the Summon feature to his followers. “I could hit the button on my car and it would open the garage door, park itself, and shut the garage door, which was pretty neat,” Banning says. “I had recorded a high-speed video of that.” Musk himself retweeted the clip, as did the official Tesla account. “And then I got a whole bunch of followers,” Banning says. “It’s like going to Vegas and winning the first time.” At first, Banning enjoyed the camaraderie and optimism of the Tesla scene. He came up with the idea of “Frunk Puppy Friday,” where he and others shared pictures of their dogs in the front trunk compartment of their Teslas. Banning also attended in-person events and made friends around the country. As “more of an introvert,” he says “it was great to have this social community that I could interact with.” Meanwhile, it seemed the sky was the limit for Musk—and Banning was willing to go to bat for him online.

Banning dismissed Musk’s critics as “Elon haters” and says he spent “too much time” trashing them and other car companies, sometimes via memes. “I was totally that guy.” He recalls going after auto industry journalists and “really anybody else who was remotely negative about Tesla—I was insufferable and just all over those folks.” Banning thought these skeptics were “suffering from misinformation” and “couldn’t see the good that Elon was doing.” He also knew there were outspoken Tesla short-sellers who wanted to see the company tank, and when he engaged with anti-Tesla opponents on X, he regularly accused them of holding these market positions.

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Tesla owner Earl Banning

Even as Banning fell into the habit of defending Musk and Tesla from detractors, a few of Musk's questionable tweets didn't sit well with him. As the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in 2020, Banning found himself aghast at the billionaire's public commentary on the virus, which was completely at odds with his knowledge of epidemiology as a health care professional. In March of that year, Musk tweeted that the "coronavirus panic is dumb" and predicted "close to zero new cases" of Covid-19 in the US by the end of April. "I started to at least realize that he was kind of a moron about many topics," Banning says, observing that even when Musk would be called out for getting things wrong, "he would never correct it and never learn anything."

Neither Musk nor Tesla returned a request for comment on the ways in which formerly ardent Tesla backers have grown disillusioned with him and the company.

Along with other prominent influencers, Banning got early beta access to FSD in late 2020. By that point, Musk had been selling a vision of fully autonomous vehicles for years, and Banning assumed Tesla had worked most of the bugs out of its system before releasing it. The first time he tried it, he says, his car lurched straight for a fire hydrant. Banning kept experimenting with FSD despite such nerve-wracking scares.

"One day, I was coming out of Walmart, and it abruptly turned itself onto the sidewalk, and was trying to drive down the sidewalk," he says. Eventually he concluded that "either Elon is lying or he's brain-damaged or something, because there's no way you could sit in that car in 2020 and think that it's going to be finished soon." (Years later, Tesla continues to face lawsuits over its driver-assistance features; recently, a Houston driver [filed a suit](#) alleging that her Cybertruck attempted to drive itself off an overpass.)

As Banning began to express his reservations about Tesla's claims and Musk's character, he lost scores of followers and fell out with friends on social media. The final straw came in December 2022, when Banning had the chance to address the CEO directly in a Twitter live chat. Banning says he told Musk of his concern that his incendiary political comments, which were becoming more frequent, could hurt Tesla. "I said my child is transgender, who had always been a big fan of Tesla, but at this point they're not because of the things you're saying about that community," Banning says. Musk waved off the remark, saying he wouldn't suppress his views to boost Tesla's stock price.

From then on, Banning was a sworn enemy of the Teslarati, even though he still loves his Model X and rarely speaks badly of Tesla itself. He made amends to some of the critics he used to attack and continues to occasionally share cute Frunk Puppy photos.

"It was kind of like a cult, but like a goofy cult, and something changed over time," he says of his old community. "When Elon took more of a godlike status, and then when he

took over Twitter [in 2022] and everything, then what you saw is everybody—they don't have an opinion about anything unless it's Elon's."

When Banning takes a jab at Musk these days, he's likely to get an [approving reply](#) from [@MissJilianne](#), a Tesla driver in Los Angeles who has been on a journey much like his own.

Jilianne, who requested WIRED use only her first name and not divulge her profession so she can avoid harassment from Tesla loyalists, has aired over 170 hours of FSD demonstrations live on X to 16,000 followers, with her streams often showcasing what she sees as the dangers of the software. Jilianne sees her videos as an important counterbalance to "fanboys" who insist that the feature is close to perfect.

Like Banning, Jilianne has retained a positive opinion of her Teslas. She began with a Model X before buying a Model S Plaid in 2022, both with FSD—the latter cost \$119,000 in total. "I love the car," she says. "It's freaking amazing." But with FSD, she believes she was sold a driver-assistance feature that has failed to live up to the advertising, and no longer trusts what Musk or Tesla say about ongoing upgrades to it, or what level of hardware will be needed for truly autonomous driving, should the company ever achieve that.

Jilianne says she used to be tight with all the major Tesla influencers. When she started using FSD, she saw herself as part of a team effort to make the product better through real-world testing. "You could see, with every update, a little bit of progress, maybe it was a little better each time," she says. "I decided, you know what, I enjoy the progress of it. I see that this is gonna be really cool once they get it to where Elon had promised." Gradually, however, Jilianne noticed how her experience with FSD diverged from the praise the Tesla hype team lavished on it. The system had significant issues that frustrated her on a daily basis. In 2024, shortly after X introduced livestreaming video, Musk shared footage of a self-driving Tesla in San Francisco. Jilianne decided it was time to document what happened when she activated FSD in her own car. As she broadcast evidence of glitches, she lost followers. "They would just say, 'Oh, you're ungrateful,'" Jilianne says of the X users who have lashed out at her over her livestreams. "They would make all kinds of excuses." Some of the most prominent Tesla faithful blocked her. Jilianne's adjusted online social circle, she says, now includes Tesla owners "aligned with the way I feel."

While Jilianne enjoys riling up the diehards, there's only so far she's willing to go. At one point, she ordered an "I Bought This Car Before Elon Went Crazy" bumper sticker and took a picture of it on her Model S "just to get them all pissed off and make them call me terrible names," she says. But the photo was staged, Jilianne says with a laugh, because

she couldn't stand to deface her beloved and "beautiful" car that way. Another time, she opted to buy a Ford Bronco instead of a Cybertruck, which she test-drove twice but didn't care for. "Oh God, they were not happy about that," she says of the Tesla devotees, who told her the truck was "going to fall apart, the transmission's going to go out, you're killing people with your fumes."

She thinks some of these individuals will never stop running cover for the company because of their long-term investments. "To me it's a lot about the money, more about the money than it is Elon—even though they say it's Elon," she says.

No one, however, provokes the wrath of the Tesla swarm like Dan O'Dowd.

A tech billionaire who founded Green Hills Software and serves as its CEO, he, too, was once a great proponent of Tesla vehicles and Musk's leadership. In 2016, he owned two Roadsters and a Model S. "Big fan," he says. That year, he was thrilled to hear Musk proclaim that a Tesla would autonomously drive itself across the US from Los Angeles to Times Square in Manhattan by the end of 2017.

"He wanted people to believe that, but there was no truth to it at all," says O'Dowd. At that time, he still argued that Musk was a "genius." But as the 2017 deadline went by and Musk stopped bothering to offer new time frames for the cross-country drive, O'Dowd wondered if it would ever happen. He now believes that "nothing worked at that point."

O'Dowd also began to notice that Tesla would make splashy announcements for new products with amazing specs—like a souped-up edition of the Roadster and a line of Tesla semi trucks—that were then indefinitely delayed.

He felt Tesla was losing sight of its most important objective: a more affordable base model EV. The company [scrapped plans](#) for a long-awaited vehicle with a price target of \$25,000 in 2024, and in January of this year, Musk announced that Tesla would [stop producing](#) the Model X and Model S, two flagship products, to focus on building its Optimus humanoid robots.

By 2020, people were sending O'Dowd videos demonstrating Tesla's beta version of FSD. "I said, 'Wait a minute, this thing is failing way too much.' Like, this isn't close to being done," he says, despite Musk's claims that it was almost perfected. O'Dowd and his team began downloading every available Tesla FSD video to analyze its malfunctions.

In 2021 he founded the Dawn Project, an organization that lobbies against the implementation of "defective and insecure software" in infrastructure and safety-critical systems. Its first and still primary campaign is aimed at shutting down FSD. The Dawn Project has warned of the dangers of the software in an ad published in The New York Times and commercials that ran during the Super Bowl broadcasts in 2023 and 2024,

which showed self-driving Teslas breezing past stopped school buses and striking child-sized mannequins in pedestrian crossings.

These videos have never convinced the FSD evangelists of anything, O'Dowd says, because no matter how the tests are conceived and filmed, the Dawn Project is accused of faking everything. The *Teslarati* smear O'Dowd himself as a bad-faith actor. "They say 'He's in the pay of the oil companies, he works for Waymo, he hates Tesla,'" O'Dowd says. In response to the Times ad, Tesla faithful Omar Qazi, who goes by the handle [@WholeMars](#) on X, published a [lengthy blog post](#) that accused O'Dowd of having "blood on his hands" because Green Hill is a defense contractor. O'Dowd expected no less when he launched the Dawn Project. "I knew what had happened to the people who had called out Tesla before," he says. Harassment and abuse come with the territory. Nevertheless, O'Dowd stays active on X, brushing off attacks from the "cultists" while sharing clip after clip of FSD failures and repeatedly reminding everyone of outlandish Musk predictions that are never vindicated. He [observed](#) earlier this month, for example, that Tesla hasn't produced 10,000 Optimus robots for factory work or scaled up its robotaxi program, benchmarks Musk said the company would meet in 2025.

Each disappointment is a blow to the solidarity of the staunchest Tesla advocates, and O'Dowd sees that "some of them are, finally, after enough years," turning against a man they used to valorize as a savior of humanity. Their splinter group seems to be growing into a sizable coalition.

And yes, if you were curious: O'Dowd, like other reformed Tesla crusaders, hasn't lost his affection for the cars. "I really like it," he says of his Model S. "And my wife still drives it." The post [The Tesla Influencers Leaving the 'Cult'](#) appeared first on [Wired](#).