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9  
10 **UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT**  
11 **CENTRAL DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA**

12 VERNON UNSWORTH,

13 Plaintiff,

14 vs.

15 ELON MUSK,

16 Defendant.  
17

Case No. 2:18-cv-08048

Judge: Hon. Stephen V. Wilson

**DEFENDANT ELON MUSK'S  
NOTICE OF MOTION AND  
MOTION TO DISMISS PLAINTIFF  
VERNON UNSWORTH'S  
COMPLAINT; MEMORANDUM OF  
POINTS AND AUTHORITIES**

Date: April 1, 2019

Time: 1:30 p.m.

Place: Courtroom 10A

Complaint Filed: Sept. 17, 2018

Trial Date: None set

1 **TO ALL PARTIES AND THEIR COUNSEL OF RECORD:**

2 **PLEASE TAKE NOTICE THAT** on April 1, 2019, at 1:30 p.m., or as soon  
3 thereafter as may be heard, in Courtroom 10A (10th Floor) of the above-entitled  
4 Court, located in the First Street Courthouse, 350 W. 1st Street, Los Angeles,  
5 California 90012, Defendant Elon Musk will and hereby does move the Court for an  
6 Order dismissing Plaintiff Vernon Unsworth's Complaint. This Motion is based on  
7 this Notice of Motion, the Memorandum of Point and Authorities filed herewith, the  
8 pleadings and papers filed in this action, and such other matters as may be presented  
9 to the Court at the time of the hearing.

10 Elon Musk makes this Motion on the grounds that the statements identified in  
11 Vernon Unsworth's complaint are not actionable.

12 This Motion is made following the conference of counsel pursuant to L.R. 7-3,  
13 which took place on December 18, 2018.

14  
15 Dated: December 26, 2018

HUESTON HENNIGAN LLP

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By: /s/ Moez M. Kaba

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Moez M. Kaba  
Attorneys for Defendant Elon Musk

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1		<u>Page</u>
2		
3	MEMORANDUM OF POINTS AND AUTHORITIES.....	1
4	I. INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND .....	1
5	II. LEGAL STANDARD .....	5
6	III. ARGUMENT .....	5
7	A. Unsworth must prove that the reasonable reader would	
8	believe Musk possessed private facts implicating Unsworth	
	as a pedophile.....	6
9	B. In context, Musk’s statements cannot reasonably be read as	
10	asserting underlying knowledge that Unsworth was a	
	pedophile .....	8
11	1. Statements on unmoderated Internet forums are	
12	presumptively opinion .....	8
13	2. Musk’s statements were made in the midst of a back-	
14	and-forth argument and in direct response to	
	personal and legal attacks .....	10
15	3. Musk disclosed the basis for his personal opinion:	
	Thailand’s documented problems with sex tourism.....	13
16	4. Musk’s over-the-top insults are not statements of fact.....	15
17	5. Musk’s colloquial statements are not reasonably	
18	interpreted as statements of facts.....	17
19	6. Musk’s expressions of uncertainty show that his	
20	statements did not have a concrete factual foundation	
	and were therefore opinion .....	18
21	7. Readers did not interpret Musk’s statements as	
	factual assertions.....	20
22	C. Musk’s Statements are Not Sufficiently Factual to be	
23	Susceptible of Being Proved True or False.....	22
24	IV. CONCLUSION .....	25

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

Page(s)

**Cases**

1

2

3

4 *Adelson v. Harris*,

5 973 F. Supp. 2d 467 (S.D.N.Y. 2013), *aff'd*, 876 F.3d 413 (2d

6 Cir. 2017)..... 15

7 *Art of Living Found. v. Does*,

8 2011 WL 2441898 (N.D. Cal. June 15, 2011) ..... 23

9 *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*,

10 556 U.S. 662 (2009) ..... 5

11 *Brahms v. Carver*,

12 33 F. Supp. 3d 192 (E.D.N.Y. 2014)..... 8

13 *Brian v. Richardson*,

14 87 N.Y.2d 46 (1995)..... 20

15 *Brown v. Elec. Arts, Inc.*,

16 724 F.3d 1235 (9th Cir. 2013)..... 5

17 *Buckley v. Littell*,

18 539 F.2d 882 (2d Cir. 1976)..... 23

19 *Carr v. Warden*,

20 159 Cal. App. 3d 1166 (1984)..... 13, 14

21 *Chaker v. Mateo*,

22 209 Cal. App. 4th 1138 (2012)..... 9, 10, 16

23 *Clifford v. Trump*,

24 2018 WL 4997419 (C.D. Cal. Oct. 15, 2018) ..... passim

25 *ComputerXpress, Inc. v. Jackson*,

26 93 Cal. App. 4th 993 (2001)..... 17

27 *Considering Homeschooling v. Morningstar Educ. Network*,

28 2008 WL 11413459 (C.D. Cal. Aug. 6, 2008)..... 4

*Doe v. Cahill*,

884 A.2d 451 (Del. 2005)..... 9, 21, 22

*Dreamstone Ent. v. Maysalward Inc.*,

2014 WL 4181026 (C.D. Cal. Aug. 18, 2014)..... 23, 24

*Dworkin v. Hustler Mag. Inc.*,

867 F.2d 1188 (9th Cir. 1989)..... 15

*Feld v. Conway*,

16 F. Supp. 3d 1 (D. Mass. 2014)..... 20

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES (cont.)

	<u>Page(s)</u>
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	
9	
10	
11	
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TABLE OF AUTHORITIES (cont.)

	<u>Page(s)</u>
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
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11	
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13	
14	
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23	
24	
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26	
27	
28	
	<i>McCabe v. Rattiner</i> , 814 F.2d 839 (1st Cir. 1987) ..... 23
	<i>Milkovich v. Lorain J. Co.</i> , 497 U.S. 1 (1990) ..... 11, 13, 16
	<i>Mirage Ent., Inc. v. FEG Entretenimientos S.A.</i> , 326 F. Supp. 3d 26 (S.D.N.Y. 2018) ..... 6
	<i>Nicosia v. De Rooy</i> , 72 F. Supp. 2d 1093 (N.D. Cal. 1999) ..... 12, 13, 15, 23
	<i>Ollman v. Evans</i> , 750 F.2d 970 (D.C. Cir. 1984) ..... 16
	<i>Oracle Am., Inc. v. Google Inc.</i> , 2016 WL 1252794 (N.D. Cal. Mar. 25, 2016) ..... 9
	<i>Partington v. Bugliosi</i> , 56 F.3d 1147 (9th Cir. 1995) ..... 13, 22
	<i>People v. Paniagua</i> , 209 Cal. App. 4th 499 (2012) ..... 14
	<i>Phantom Touring, Inc. v. Affiliated Pub.</i> , 953 F.2d 724 (1st Cir. 1992) ..... 23
	<i>Price v. Stossel</i> , 620 F.3d 992 (9th Cir. 2010) ..... 13
	<i>Price v. Viking Penguin, Inc.</i> , 881 F.2d 1426 (8th Cir. 1989) ..... 23
	<i>RainSoft v. MacFarland</i> , 2018 WL 4696737 (D.R.I. Sept. 30, 2018) ..... 10
	<i>Redmond v. Gawker Media, LLC</i> , 2012 WL 3243507 (Cal. Ct. App. Aug. 10, 2012) ..... 21, 22
	<i>Rocker Mgmt. LLC v. John Does</i> , 2003 WL 22149380 (N.D. Cal. May 29, 2003) ..... 17
	<i>Sandals Resorts Int’l Ltd. v. Google, Inc.</i> , 925 N.Y.S.2d 407 (2011) ..... 9
	<i>SI03, Inc. v. Bodybuilding.com, LLC</i> , 2008 WL 11348458 (D. Idaho May 1, 2008) ..... 16
	<i>Standing Committee on Discipline of U.S. Dist. Ct for C.D. Cal. v.</i> <i>Yagman</i> , 55 F.3d 1430 (9th Cir. 1995) ..... 3, 6, 19

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES (cont.)

	<u>Page(s)</u>
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	
9	
10	
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302 F.3d 998 (9th Cir. 2002)..... 11

*Stolatis v. Hernandez,*  
77 N.Y.S.3d 473 (2018) ..... 24

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206 Cal. App. 4th 669 (2012)..... 4, 9, 17

*Tipping v. Martin,*  
2016 WL 397088 (N.D. Tex. Feb. 2, 2016)..... 7, 20

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2007 WL 2331073 (S.D.N.Y. Aug. 16, 2007), aff’d, 279 F. App’x 46 (2d Cir. 2008) ..... 4, 6, 7, 11

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364 F. Supp. 2d 1149 (C.D. Cal. 2005)..... 6

*Underwager v. Channel 9 Austl.,*  
69 F.3d 361 (9th Cir. 1995)..... 8, 22, 25

*United States v. Bradbury,*  
111 F. Supp. 3d 918 (N.D. Ind. 2015)..... 10

*United States v. Donnelly,*  
2005 WL 1575270 (N.D. Cal. June 30, 2005) ..... 14

*United States v. Durham,*  
902 F.3d 1180 (10th Cir. 2018)..... 14

*Wallace v. Geckosystems Int’l Corp.,*  
2013 WL 4054147 (Del. Super. Ct. July 31, 2013) ..... 7, 16

*ZL Techs., Inc. v. Gartner, Inc.,*  
709 F. Supp. 2d 789 (N.D. Cal. 2010), aff’d. 433 F. App’x 547 (9th Cir. 2011) ..... 5

**Rules**

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TABLE OF AUTHORITIES (cont.)

Page(s)

Restatement (Second) Torts § 566..... 16



**MEMORANDUM OF POINTS AND AUTHORITIES**

**I. INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND**

In June and July 2018, Elon Musk and numerous others at SpaceX, the Boring Company, and Tesla, sought to help rescue twelve boys who were trapped in one of Thailand's caves. (Compl. ¶¶ 23-25.) Many individuals, including representatives of the Thai government, other officials, and members of the public, confronting the prospects of an unfathomable tragedy, looked to Musk—who is known for pioneering revolutionary transportation technologies at his companies Tesla, SpaceX, and the Boring Company—for help.

Within hours of being in communication with Thai officials, Musk directed Tesla, SpaceX, and the Boring Company (which specializes in tunneling and construction) engineers to develop potential solutions to provide assistance to the rescue.<sup>1</sup> And soon after, Musk sent the first of what would be several engineers to Chiang Rai. Dozens of engineers, and Musk himself, doubled down on their work, sacrificing their familial obligations and cancelling vacations, so that they could help the cave rescue efforts.<sup>2</sup> The team worked countless hours each day for days on end, deploying the knowledge they had gained through years of developing unprecedented transportation systems. Aware of the time constraints, the team developed a groundbreaking miniature submarine that could carry the children to safety. The development efforts included not just developing rescue equipment but also providing resources for pumping water in order to provide additional capacity to keep up with oncoming rains (including delivering ground sump pumps, Tesla Powerwalls, and securing extremely high capacity pumps in Europe), and surveying in order to increase air flow into the cave and drain water out (including delivering

<sup>1</sup> Justin Wise, *Elon Musk Sends Engineers to Help Thai Cave Rescue Mission*, THE HILL (July 6, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Chelsea Gohd, *Elon Musk Sends SpaceX Engineers to Aid Soccer Team Trapped in Thai Cave*, SPACE.COM (July 6, 2018).

(Continued...)

1 underwater surveying equipment and arranging for sonar scanners and a 3D laser  
2 tracker).<sup>3</sup>

3 In developing their rescue vehicle, Musk communicated directly with Richard  
4 Stanton who co-led the dive rescue team and provided Musk with details and  
5 specifications. (Declaration of Moez M. Kaba, filed herewith, (“Kaba Decl.”) Ex. 1  
6 (E-mail exchange between Musk and Stanton.)) Other members of Musk’s team  
7 communicated with divers and other military officials on the ground, and  
8 incorporated their feedback in designing the rescue equipment. Stanton explicitly  
9 urged Musk to “continu[e] with the development of this system” as “it may well be  
10 used.” (*Id.*)

11 In addition to other SpaceX, Tesla, and the Boring Company employees who  
12 traveled to Thailand, Musk himself put his professional and personal obligations on  
13 hold to travel to Thailand to speak to rescuers on the ground and help in any way  
14 possible. As reported in the Thai press, Musk was greeted at the airport by the Thai  
15 Prime Minister who asked him to provide equipment “that could help Thailand in the  
16 future.”<sup>4</sup> Members of the Thai Army and Navy also greeted Musk and his team at the  
17 airport and invited them to the cave rescue site.

18 On July 10, the children were rescued. In reaction, Musk tweeted: “Great  
19 news that they made it out safely. Congratulations to an outstanding rescue team!”  
20 Although it was ultimately not used in the rescue operation, the mini-submarine  
21 developed by Musk and his team of volunteers was given to the Thai Navy SEAL  
22 team for use in future rescue missions. SpaceX engineers spent additional time in  
23 Thailand training members of the Thai Navy to use the mini-submarine.<sup>5</sup>

24  
25 <sup>3</sup> Ashley Wong, *Elon Musk Sends an ‘Escape Pod’ to Help in Thailand Cave Rescue*,  
26 USA TODAY (July 9, 2018).

27 <sup>4</sup> Wasamon Audjarint & Kornrawee Panyasuppakun, *PM: Musk ‘Keen to Invest in  
Thailand’*, THE NATION (July 11, 2018).

28 <sup>5</sup> Muktita Suhartono & Julia Jacobs, *Thai Navy May Put Elon Musk’s Mini-  
Submarine to Use. One Day.*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (July 12, 2018).

1 Musk and engineers from his companies were singularly focused on assisting  
2 the rescue efforts in any way they could. Yet, Plaintiff Vernon Unsworth decided to  
3 gratuitously attack them and insult their contributions. Unsworth appeared on CNN  
4 and, for reasons unknown, decided to pick a fight with Musk in spectacularly public  
5 fashion. (Complaint, ¶ 71.) Despite having never met Musk, Unsworth began  
6 striking at Musk and his colleagues. (*Id.*) Unsworth called Musk’s efforts a “PR  
7 stunt” that had “absolutely no chance of working.” (*Id.*) He also advised Musk to  
8 “stick his submarine where it hurts.” (*Id.*)

9 Contrary to Unsworth’s assertions, the Thai Government appreciated Musk’s  
10 and his team’s help. The Prime Minister of Thailand wrote to Musk to “convey [his]  
11 deep appreciation to [Musk] and [his] engineering team for [their] expeditious and  
12 extraordinary efforts in constructing the Space-X mini-submarine “Wild Boar” to  
13 assist the rescue operation...” (Kaba Decl., Ex. 2 (Letter from Prime Minister to  
14 Musk).) The Prime Minister commented that he was “particularly touched” that  
15 Musk “personally travelled to Thailand to deliver the ‘Wild Boar’ Space-X mini-sub,  
16 which was made possible through [his] expertise and the cooperation with various  
17 experts involved with this highly complicated and urgent rescue operation.” (*Id.*)

18 Similarly, the Royal Thai Army Special Forces commended Musk and  
19 SpaceX’s efforts, writing:

20 I would like to express to you and all the SpaceX members my sincerest  
21 appreciation and gratitude for your support during the “Operation Wild  
22 Boars.” You will be in our memory and our hearts that once you are one  
23 who made the impossible mission possible. From what you did really  
24 give us hope and made us believe in humanity. We will be very pleased  
to welcome you as our guest when you come to visit Thailand  
again. Thank you so much from our hearts.

25 (Kaba Decl., Ex. 3 (Letter from Royal Thai Army Special Forces to Musk).) The  
26 Royal Thai Army further issued a Special Warfare Command Certificate to Musk  
27 and his team in recognition of their assistance. (Kaba Decl., Ex. 4 (Royal Thai Army  
28

1 Certificate).)

2       These facts did not deter Unsworth from berating Musk and the selfless work  
3 of the engineering team he had assembled. Shocked by Unsworth’s indefensible and  
4 baseless attacks, Musk answered to defend himself and the efforts of SpaceX, Tesla,  
5 and the Boring Company employees who had given up their days and nights to help  
6 find a solution. (Complaint, Ex. B, p. 28.) Musk took to Twitter—a social  
7 networking website infamous for invective and hyperbole—to respond. (*Id.*) Musk,  
8 unaware even of Unsworth’s name, tweeted that he had never met the “dude” from  
9 CNN, but was nonetheless determined to prove him wrong. (*Id.* ¶ 75.) He vowed to  
10 demonstrate that his submarine could navigate the caves “no problemo.” (*Id.* ¶ 76.)  
11 And just like Unsworth did, Musk tacked on a gratuitous barb. (*Id.*) Referencing  
12 Thailand’s documented reputation, Musk said that Unsworth was “sus” for being a  
13 “British expat guy who lives in Thailand.” (*Id.* ¶ 73.) Later, referring back to these  
14 suspicions, Musk dubbed Unsworth “pedo guy.” (*Id.* ¶ 76.)

15       The public knew from the outset that Musk’s insults were not intended to be  
16 statements of fact; indeed many wondered aloud why Unsworth attacked Musk’s  
17 efforts in the first place. Unsworth himself claims that Musk was criticized for  
18 making accusations “*without any evidence.*” (*Id.* ¶ 80 (emphasis added).)

19       Musk moved on and decided to end the war of words. He deleted his prior  
20 tweets about Unsworth and publicly apologized. (*Id.*) Musk tweeted that his initial  
21 remarks had been impulsive—“spoken in anger”—and that Unsworth’s offensive  
22 comments did “not justify” Musk’s outburst. (*Id.*)

23       Then Unsworth’s lawyer entered the fray. (*Id.* ¶ 82.) Like Musk, Unsworth’s  
24 lawyer also chose to communicate on the rough-and-tumble Twitter platform,  
25 chiding Musk and telling him to “check his mail before tweeting.” (*Id.* ¶ 87.) To  
26 this public tweet, Unsworth’s lawyer attached a picture of a demand letter that he  
27 allegedly sent Musk days earlier. (*Id.* Ex. H, p. 40.) In that letter, Unsworth’s  
28 lawyer escalated the rhetoric and used words Musk never did. He claimed that Musk

1 had accused Unsworth of engaging in “sexual exploitation of Thai children.” (*Id.*)<sup>6</sup>

2 Unsworth and his team’s efforts to the stir the pot worked. Media coverage  
3 reached a fever pitch, with numerous outlets reaching out to Musk for comment on  
4 Unsworth’s lawyer’s Twitter jabs.

5 Musk did not respond publicly. Instead, he sent an “[o]ff the record” e-mail  
6 responding to BuzzFeed’s inquiry and chewing out the journalist. (*Id.* Ex. K, p. 56.)  
7 As part of his insults, Musk included a hyperlink to a Google search of “Chiang Rai  
8 child trafficking.” (*Id.*) Musk theorized that Chiang Rai “isn’t where you go for  
9 caves, it’s where you go for something else.” (*Id.*) Culminating this long wind up,  
10 Musk caricatured Unsworth as having a “child bride who was about 12 years old.”  
11 (*Id.* ¶ 88.) Musk closed by answering Unsworth’s lawyer’s threat: “I hope he  
12 fucking sues me.” (*Id.*)

13 Even though Musk designated the e-mail as “[o]ff the record,” the BuzzFeed  
14 journalist decided to publish it anyways. (*Id.* Ex. K, p. 55.) The journalist described  
15 Musk’s bombast as “evidenceless criticism” of Unsworth. (*Id.* p. 55-56.). While  
16 many readers criticized Musk for lodging what they understood to be groundless  
17 accusations (and criticized Unsworth for disparaging Musk and his team’s efforts to  
18 help), not a single reader seemed to construe Musk’s statements literally. (*See, e.g.,*  
19 *id.* Ex. J, pp. 49-50.)

20 Shortly thereafter Unsworth filed this lawsuit, claiming that Musk’s statements  
21 were defamatory. Musk now moves to dismiss.

22 This motion boils down to a single question: Accepting Unsworth’s well-  
23 pleaded allegations as true, would a reasonable reader believe that Musk’s statements  
24 were supported by objective facts or were instead “nonactionable opinion”? *Gardner*  
25

26 \_\_\_\_\_  
27 <sup>6</sup> To further publicize the dispute, Unsworth’s lawyer “tagged” journalists from  
28 BuzzFeed (@RMac18), TechCrunch (@yoda), and FemaleOneZero (@TijenOnaran). *See* L. Lin Wood (@LLinWood), Twitter (Aug. 29, 2018),  
<https://twitter.com/lilinwood/status/1034761900100407296?lang=en>.

1 *v. Martino*, 563 F.3d 981, 987 (9th Cir. 2009); *see also id.* (explaining that the  
2 “threshold question” in any “defamation claim is whether a reasonable factfinder  
3 could conclude that the contested statements implies an assertion of objective fact”).

4 A statement is one of objective fact only if the reasonable reader would  
5 believe that the speaker possesses underlying information to support it. *See, e.g.,*  
6 *Standing Committee on Discipline of U.S. Dist. Ct for C.D. Cal. v. Yagman*, 55 F.3d  
7 1430, 1441 (9th Cir. 1995) (explaining that a statement “is not actionable” unless the  
8 speaker is “claiming to be in possession of objectively verifiable facts”). Here, the  
9 reasonable reader would not have believed that Musk—without having ever met  
10 Unsworth, in the midst of a schoolyard spat on social media, and from 8,000 miles  
11 afar—was conveying that he was in possession of private knowledge that Unsworth  
12 was sexually attracted to children or engaged in sex acts with children. *See Torain v.*  
13 *Liu*, 2007 WL 2331073, at \*3 (S.D.N.Y. Aug. 16, 2007), *aff’d*, 279 F. App’x 46 (2d  
14 Cir. 2008) (framing the inquiry in a similar defamation case as whether “an informed  
15 listener would think that defendant was accusing plaintiff of being a pedophile based  
16 on some undisclosed information known only to him”). Musk’s statements were thus  
17 necessarily just imaginative attacks; even if offensive, such speculative insults are by  
18 their nature opinion and protected by the First Amendment.

19 Context drives the inquiry into whether the reasonable reader would infer  
20 Musk to possess a factual basis for his claims. *See Knieval v. ESPN*, 393 F.3d 1068,  
21 1075 (9th Cir. 2005). The reasonable reader doesn’t take everything literally: he can  
22 spot “lusty and imaginative expressions of contempt,” *Considering Homeschooling*  
23 *v. Morningstar Educ. Network*, 2008 WL 11413459, at \*3 (C.D. Cal. Aug. 6, 2008)  
24 (citation omitted); he knows that disputing parties are very likely to include  
25 unsubstantiated charges against one another, *Info. Control Corp. v. Genesis One*  
26 *Computer Corp.*, 611 F.2d 781, 784 (9th Cir. 1980); he recognizes that there is a set  
27 of “short-hand phrases and language [that is] not generally found in fact-based  
28 documents,” *Global Telemedia Int’l, Inc. v. Doe 1*, 132 F. Supp. 2d 1261, 1264 (C.D.

1 Cal. 2001); and he expects internet speakers to “play fast and loose with facts,”  
2 *Summit Bank v. Rogers*, 206 Cal. App. 4th 669, 696 (2012) (citation omitted).

3 Unsworth’s complaint demonstrates that the reasonable reader would not—and  
4 indeed did not—make such a leap. The reasonable reader was aware: Musk and  
5 Unsworth never met (Compl. Ex. B, p. 28.); Unsworth disparaged Musk out of the  
6 blue and over the public airwaves (*id.* ¶ 71.); and Musk hit back with vituperative  
7 internet insults trading on Thailand’s reputation (*id.* Ex. D, p. 32.). And actual  
8 readers—as revealed by comments in exhibits attached to Unsworth’s Complaint—  
9 contemporaneously recognized Musk’s comments for what they were: over-the-top  
10 insults not driven by first-hand knowledge. (*Id.* Ex. J, p. 49.)

11 In short, the reasonable reader would distinguish Musk’s statements from  
12 those in which factual information about child sex abuse is conveyed. Musk’s off-  
13 the-cuff tweets and e-mails differed in kind from, for example, a Boston Globe  
14 Spotlight exposé, a university press conference, or a criminal complaint.

15 For these reasons and as set forth below, Unsworth’s suit should be dismissed.

## 16 **II. LEGAL STANDARD**

17 A Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6) motion to dismiss is a challenge to  
18 the sufficiency of the pleadings set forth in the complaint. *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556  
19 U.S. 662, 678 (2009). Although a Court must accept well-pleaded factual allegations  
20 as true, a court is not required to “accept any unreasonable inferences or assume the  
21 truth of legal conclusions.” *Brown v. Elec. Arts, Inc.*, 724 F.3d 1235, 1248 (9th Cir.  
22 2013) (citation omitted).<sup>7</sup>

23 If the plaintiff fails this standard and “it is clear that the complaint could not be  
24 saved by any amendment,” he need not be given leave to amend. *Livid Holdings Ltd.*

25  
26  
27 <sup>7</sup> For purposes of this motion to dismiss, Musk therefore assumes the truth of the  
28 allegations in the complaint and is not asking the court to consider his state of mind  
or any information known to him. See *Flowers v. Carville*, 310 F.3 1118, 1131 (9th  
Cir. 2002) (discussing the actual malice standard).

1 *v. Salomon Smith Barney, Inc.*, 416 F.3d 940, 946 (9th Cir. 2005); *see also ZL*  
 2 *Techs., Inc. v. Gartner, Inc.*, 709 F. Supp. 2d 789, 801 (N.D. Cal. 2010), *aff'd*. 433 F.  
 3 App'x 547 (9th Cir. 2011) (dismissing defamation claim against non-actionable  
 4 statements with prejudice and collecting cases that did the same).

### 5 **III. ARGUMENT**

6 The “threshold question” in any “defamation claim is whether a reasonable  
 7 factfinder could conclude that the contested statement implies an assertion of  
 8 objective fact.” *Gardner*, 563 F.3d at 987 (citations omitted). This inquiry “is a  
 9 question of law” susceptible to Rule 12(b)(6) challenge. *Id.* at 986. Here, even  
 10 accepting Unsworth’s allegations as true, no reasonable factfinder would conclude  
 11 that Musk’s statements were assertions of objective fact.

#### 12 **A. Unsworth must prove that the reasonable reader would believe** 13 **Musk possessed private facts implicating Unsworth as a pedophile**

14 Only false statements *of fact* can be defamatory. *See, e.g., Gardner*, 563 F.3d  
 15 at 986. This is because “[u]nder the First Amendment there is no such thing as a  
 16 false idea.” *Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc.*, 418 U.S. 323, 339 (1974). No matter how  
 17 “pernicious an opinion may seem, we depend for its correction not on the conscience  
 18 of judges and juries but on the competition of other ideas.” *Id.* It is the plaintiff’s  
 19 burden to make this showing: in a defamation case, “to survive a motion to dismiss, a  
 20 plaintiff must establish both that the words about which they complain are  
 21 reasonably capable of sustaining a defamatory meaning, and that they are not mere  
 22 comment within the ambit of the First Amendment.” *Troy Group, Inc. v. Tilson*, 364  
 23 F. Supp. 2d 1149, 1152 (C.D. Cal. 2005) (citations omitted).

24 A statement of fact is one that is reasonably understood to be supported by  
 25 underlying and undisclosed first-hand information. *See, e.g., Yagman*, 55 F.3d at  
 26 1441 (explaining that a statement “is not actionable” unless the speaker is “claiming  
 27 to be in possession of objectively verifiable facts”); *Mirage Ent., Inc. v. FEG*  
 28 *Entretenimientos S.A.*, 326 F. Supp. 3d 26, 38 (S.D.N.Y. 2018) (finding a statement



1 non-actionable because the speaker “did not imply that she knows certain facts,  
2 unknown to the audience, which supported her opinion” (citation and alteration  
3 omitted)). This requirement makes sense: if a reader would not think a statement  
4 was backed by objective, verifiable fact, then the statement can be nothing other than  
5 “an interpretation, a theory, conjecture, or surmise.” *Yagman*, 55 F.3d at 1441.

6 Courts have consistently held imaginative insults—no matter how repugnant—  
7 are nonactionable so long as a reasonable reader would not believe them to be  
8 backed by objective fact. *See, e.g., Torain*, 2007 WL 2331073, at \*1 (statement that  
9 plaintiff was a “sick racist pedophile” was nonactionable because “no reasonable  
10 person would have believed that defendant was conveying a fact about plaintiff—*i.e.*,  
11 that plaintiff was engaging in acts of pedophilia”); *Krinsky v. Doe 6*, 159 Cal. App.  
12 4th 1154 (2008) (statement that plaintiff “has poor feminine hygiene” was not  
13 defamatory because “nothing in this [statement] suggested that the author was  
14 imparting knowledge of actual facts to the reader”); *Tipping v. Martin*, 2016 WL  
15 397088, \*2-3 (N.D. Tex. Feb. 2, 2016) (statement that plaintiff was a “whore” and  
16 “journalist slut” was nonactionable because the audience would not have believed the  
17 speaker to have had “any knowledge concerning [the plaintiff’s] personal life or the  
18 quality of her work as a journalist”); *cf. Hustler Mag., Inc. v. Falwell*, 485 U.S. 46,  
19 48 (1988) (noting that a cartoon depicting plaintiff as having “a drunken incestuous  
20 rendezvous” was “doubtless gross and repugnant” but “could not reasonably have  
21 been interpreted as stating actual facts”).

22 The question here is thus a narrow one: Did Musk’s statements signal that he  
23 was in possession of additional undisclosed facts about Unsworth showing that  
24 Unsworth was sexually attracted to children or had engaged in sex acts with  
25 children? *See Torain*, 2007 WL 2331073, at \*3 (framing the inquiry in a similar  
26 defamation case as whether “an informed listener would think that defendant was  
27 accusing plaintiff of being a pedophile based on some undisclosed information  
28 known only to him”).

1 Although Unsworth attempts to make this essential showing by pleading it in  
 2 his Complaint,<sup>8</sup> he cannot plead “legal conclusions.” *See Leite v. Crane Co.*, 749  
 3 F.3d 1117, 1121 (9th Cir. 2014). And as demonstrated below, the “facts” alleged in  
 4 Unsworth’s Complaint fall short of “plausibly” establishing his legal theory. *Id.*

5 **B. In context, Musk’s statements cannot reasonably be read as**  
 6 **asserting underlying knowledge that Unsworth was a pedophile**

7 To determine whether a statement is factual, courts consider “the totality of the  
 8 circumstances in which it was made.” *Underwager v. Channel 9 Austl.*, 69 F.3d 361,  
 9 366 (9th Cir. 1995). This inquiry is driven by “context.” *Knieval*, 393 F.3d at 1075.  
 10 “What constitutes a statement of fact in one context may be treated as a statement of  
 11 opinion in another, in light of the nature and content of the communication taken as a  
 12 whole.” *Gregory v. McDonnell Douglas Corp.*, 552 P.2d 425, 428 (Cal. 1976).

13 Context is therefore “paramount” and can alone “be dispositive.” *Knieval*, 393  
 14 F.3d at 1075; *accord Koch v. Goldway*, 817 F.2d 507, 509 (9th Cir. 1987) (“Context  
 15 does resolve the matter.”); *see also Brahms v. Carver*, 33 F. Supp. 3d 192, 198  
 16 (E.D.N.Y. 2014) (“The upshot is that context is key.”).

17 Such is the case here. Considering the “totality of the circumstances,”  
 18 *Underwager*, 69 F.3d at 366, Musk’s statements check nearly all the boxes that  
 19 courts consider when making similar fact-versus-opinion determinations. His  
 20 statements are: (1) cast on a turbulent internet forum (Compl. ¶ 73); (2) part and  
 21 parcel of a personal and legal dispute (*id.*); (3) presented as personal commentary  
 22 about disclosed facts (*id.* ¶ 76); (4) intended as acerbic insults (*id.* ¶ 80); (5) full of  
 23 informalities (*id.* ¶ 76); (6) couched in terms conveying uncertainty (*id.* ¶ 83); and  
 24 (7) interpreted as opinion by those who received the statement (*id.* at Ex. J, p. 49-50).

25 1. *Statements on unmoderated Internet forums are presumptively*  
 26

27 <sup>8</sup> Compl. ¶ 139 (alleging that Musk “conveyed to the world that he was in possession  
 28 of undisclosed false and defamatory facts proving Mr. Unsworth to be guilty of the  
 accusations Musk lodged against him”).

1 *opinion*

2 Musk's statements—all made online through Twitter and e-mail—receive a  
3 presumption of First Amendment protection. Internet speech is unique. “Unlike  
4 many traditional media, there are no controls on [internet] postings.” *Global*  
5 *Telemedia*, 132 F. Supp. 2d at 1264. “The low barrier to speaking online allows  
6 anyone with an Internet connection to publish his thoughts, free from the editorial  
7 constraints that serve as gatekeepers for most traditional media of disseminating  
8 information.” *Sandals Resorts Int’l Ltd. v. Google, Inc.*, 925 N.Y.S.2d 407 (2011).

9 Reasonable readers discount internet speech accordingly. They “expect to see  
10 strongly worded opinions rather than objective facts.” *Summit Bank*, 206 Cal. App.  
11 4th at 697. And they know that “online discussions” are “more like a vehicle for  
12 emotional catharsis than a forum for the rapid exchange of information.” *Krinsky*,  
13 159 Cal. App. 4th at 1163; *see also Summit Bank*, 206 Cal. App. 4th at 696  
14 (explaining that “any reader” familiar with internet culture knows that posters “play  
15 fast and loose with facts” (citations omitted)).

16 A statement made on an unmoderated internet forum therefore comes with a  
17 heavy thumb on the scale favoring opinion. *See Summit Bank*, 206 Cal. App. 4th at  
18 696 (explaining that the reader “should be predisposed to view [such statements]  
19 with a certain amount of skepticism, and with an understanding that they will likely  
20 present one-sided viewpoints rather than assertions of provable facts”); *Doe v.*  
21 *Cahill*, 884 A.2d 451, 465 (Del. 2005) (explaining that internet forums are “vehicles  
22 for the expression of opinions; by their very nature, they are not a source of facts or  
23 data upon which a reasonable person would rely”).

24 The presumption is particularly strong here because Twitter was the  
25 gravitational center of this war of words. It is where Musk first responded to  
26 Unsworth’s criticisms and where Unsworth’s lawyer reinvigorated the dispute by  
27 tweeting directly at Musk. (Compl. ¶¶ 73, 87.)

28 Twitter facilitates the exchange of unfiltered opinion. It allows its users to

1 communicate directly with one another through “tweets”—messages of 140-  
2 characters or less—that are not pre-screened by any moderator. *See Oracle Am., Inc.*  
3 *v. Google Inc.*, 2016 WL 1252794, at \*5 (N.D. Cal. Mar. 25, 2016). As courts  
4 recognize, this format breeds informality and incivility. *See United States v.*  
5 *Bradbury*, 111 F. Supp. 3d 918, 921 (N.D. Ind. 2015) (recognizing Twitter as a place  
6 where “a lot of people spout off”); *Jacobus v. Trump*, 51 N.Y.S.3d 330 (N.Y. Sup.  
7 Ct.), *aff’d*, 64 N.Y.S.3d 889 (N.Y. App. Div. 2017) (“The informal nature of  
8 conversation on Twitter tends to encourage people to talk more freely about others,  
9 including the spreading of rumors and potential falsehoods.” (citation omitted)).

10 Twitter participants therefore expect to read opinions, not facts. *See RainSoft*  
11 *v. MacFarland*, 2018 WL 4696737, at \*5 (D.R.I. Sept. 30, 2018) (noting that  
12 “Twitter meltdowns” are an example of the “non-literal commentary [that has]  
13 become an integral part of social discourse” (citation omitted)).

14 Applying this heavy presumption, courts routinely find that statements of  
15 apparent fact assume the character of opinion when posted on unmoderated internet  
16 forums generally and on Twitter specifically. *See, e.g., Clifford v. Trump*, 2018 WL  
17 4997419, at \*8 (C.D. Cal. Oct. 15, 2018) (treating as “rhetorical hyperbole” a tweet  
18 accusing the plaintiff of lying and calling her a “total con job”); *Chaker v. Mateo*,  
19 209 Cal. App. 4th 1138, 1142 (2012) (treating as opinion statements on internet  
20 message board that the plaintiff is a “deadbeat dad,” “may be taking steroids,” “is  
21 into illegal activities,” and “picks up street walkers and homeless drug addicts”);  
22 *Jacobus*, 51 N.Y.S.3d at 334 (treating as opinion tweets that plaintiff had “begged”  
23 for a job and had twice been rejected); *Krinsky*, 159 Cal. App. 4th at 1159 (treating  
24 as opinion statements that corporation’s leaders are “crooks” and that its president  
25 had “fake medical degree”).

26 2. *Musk’s statements were made in the midst of a back-and-forth*  
27 *argument and in direct response to personal and legal attacks*

28 When a statement is made in a “heated and volatile setting, even seemingly

1 ‘factual’ statements take on an appearance more closely resembling opinion than  
2 objective fact.” *Steam Press Holdings, Inc. v. Haw. Teamsters, Allied Workers*  
3 *Union, Loc. 996*, 302 F.3d 998, 1006 (9th Cir. 2002). In that setting, the reasonable  
4 reader will “anticipate efforts by the parties to persuade others to their positions by  
5 use of epithets, fiery rhetoric or hyperbole, (and thus) language which generally  
6 might be considered as statements of fact may well assume the character of  
7 statements of opinion.” *Info. Control Corp.*, 611 F.2d at 784 (citation omitted).

8 A statement is particularly likely to be considered opinion when made in direct  
9 response to a personal slight. In *Torain v. Liu*, for example, the defendant called the  
10 plaintiff a “racist pedophile” after the plaintiff had disparaged the defendant’s family  
11 during a television interview. 2007 WL 2331073, at \*1. The court acknowledged  
12 that “pedophile” could potentially signify a factual assertion that “plaintiff was  
13 engaging in acts of pedophilia.” *Id.* at \*3. But because the defendant’s statements  
14 were “made in direct response to what he considered to be plaintiff’s outrageous and  
15 offensive on-air comments,” they “were clearly statements of opinion.” *Id.* at \*2.  
16 Likewise, in *Jacobus*, the defendant’s tweet contained the facially factual assertion  
17 that he had refused to hire the plaintiff even after she “begged” him for a job. 51  
18 N.Y.S.3d at 342. That too was considered opinion because it “followed plaintiff’s  
19 negative commentary about [the defendant],” which “signals to readers that plaintiff  
20 and [defendant] were engaged in a petty quarrel.” *Id.*

21 This presumption is amplified when legal threats have been made. In that  
22 setting, reasonable readers know that the speaker is representing just “one side in a  
23 controversy,” so “they are properly warned to expect that the opinions expressed may  
24 rest on passion rather than factual foundation.” *Milkovich v. Lorain J. Co.*, 497 U.S.  
25 1, 33 n.8 (1990) (Brennan, J., dissenting). Thus, statements made in a legal dispute  
26 by one side about the other are likely to disparage the opponent and are “**highly**  
27 **unlikely** to be understood by their audience as statements of fact.” *Info. Control*  
28 *Corp.*, 611 F.2d at 784 (emphasis added); *see also Clifford*, 2018 WL 4997419, at \*8

1 (holding that defendant’s comments were mere “rhetorical hyperbole” when made  
2 after the plaintiff had “present[ed] herself as [the defendant’s] political adversary”  
3 and the defendant’s “tweet served as a public rejoinder to [the] allegations made by  
4 Plaintiff”); *Nicosia v. De Rooy*, 72 F. Supp. 2d 1093, 1101 (N.D. Cal. 1999)  
5 (explaining that defendant’s statements made on her “personal web-site, and through  
6 Internet discussion groups, as part of a heated debate concerning a bitter legal dispute  
7 [in which the plaintiff] has fully engaged” are more likely to be opinion than fact).

8 The reasonable reader of Musk’s statements would have known that they were  
9 mere “epithets, fiery rhetoric or hyperbole.” *Info. Control Corp.*, 611 F.2d at 784.

10 Unsworth set the tone with a crass personal attack, telling Musk to “stick his  
11 submarine where it hurts.” (Compl. ¶ 71.) Unsworth attacked both Musk’s  
12 professional reputation and his personal motives for providing humanitarian aid.

13 Musk fought fire with fire. He tweeted insults in direct response to  
14 Unsworth’s unflattering public comments—a point specifically pleaded by  
15 Unsworth. (*Id.* ¶ 72 (alleging Musk made his statements because he was “angered by  
16 Mr. Unsworth’s criticism of [him] in the CNN Interview”).) The reasonable reader  
17 would understand that this was a “petty quarrel.” *Jacobus*, 51 N.Y.S.3d at 341.

18 Musk’s e-mails to BuzzFeed are likewise a direct rejoinder to Unsworth. They  
19 came after Unsworth’s lawyer took to Twitter to publish an open letter threatening to  
20 sue Musk. (Compl. ¶ 87.) Unsworth’s lawyer in fact “tagged” @elonmusk and  
21 several journalists in the tweet, ensuring that each would receive direct notice of the  
22 message. (*Id.* ¶ 87 & Ex. 1 at 2; *supra* note 6.) Unsworth’s lawyer then suggested to  
23 Musk that he “check his mail before tweeting” and made it publicly known that he  
24 was “in the process of preparing a civil complaint.” (*Id.* Ex. H, p. 40.) It was this  
25 goading by Unsworth’s counsel that caused the BuzzFeed journalist to e-mail Musk  
26 for comment. (*Id.* Ex. K, p. 53.)

27 Only *after* these public provocations did Musk respond to BuzzFeed with the  
28 allegedly defamatory e-mails. (*Id.* ¶¶ 87-92.) But by then, the litigation lines had

1 been drawn. The reasonable reader would know that Musk’s statements might  
2 “include unsubstantiated charges” and “rest on passion rather than factual  
3 foundation,” *Milkovich*, 497 U.S. at 33 n.8 (Brennan, J., dissenting), and is therefore  
4 “**highly unlikely**” to have considered them “statements of fact.” *Info. Control Corp.*,  
5 611 F.2d at 784. This is particularly so because Unsworth was not standing on the  
6 sideline. He had his lawyer provoke Musk through Twitter—a tactic that resulted in  
7 significant media attention and prompted further comment from Musk. *See Nicosia*,  
8 72 F. Supp. 2d at 1101 (statements were opinion when made in a “heated debate  
9 concerning a bitter legal dispute” in which the plaintiff was “fully engaged”).

10 3. *Musk disclosed the basis for his personal opinion: Thailand’s*  
11 *documented problems with sex tourism*

12 “[A] speaker who outlines the factual basis for his conclusion is protected by  
13 the First Amendment.” *Price v. Stossel*, 620 F.3d 992, 1004 (9th Cir. 2010). This is  
14 because if “the author presents the factual basis for his statement, [it] can only be  
15 read as his personal conclusion about the information presented, *not as a statement of*  
16 *fact.*” *Partington v. Bugliosi*, 56 F.3d 1147, 1156 (9th Cir. 1995) (citation omitted).  
17 In *Carr v. Warden*, for example, members of a city planning commission filed a  
18 defamation suit against an activist who said the commission’s vote had been  
19 “bought.” 159 Cal. App. 3d 1166, 1168 (1984). The activist, however, explained his  
20 basis for this charge was a sudden change in the commission’s position. *Id.*  
21 (“otherwise, how could you explain a 3-3 vote at one meeting on an issue and then at  
22 the very next meeting a 6-1 vote?”). Despite the accusation of impropriety, this  
23 statement was non-actionable because it “disclose[d] the precise facts on which [it]  
24 was based.” *Id.* at 1170.

25 The same is true here. Musk disclosed the basis for his opinion: he said that  
26 Unsworth was “sus” for being a “British expat guy who lives in Thailand.” (Compl.  
27 ¶ 73.) *See, e.g., United States v. Durham*, 902 F.3d 1180, 1261 (10th Cir. 2018)  
28 (citing congressional committee report that identifies Thailand as a country

1 “experiencing significant problems with sex tourism”).

2 The reasonable reader would make this connection. *See People v. Paniagua*,  
3 209 Cal. App. 4th 499, 521 (2012) (reasoning that the “prosecution did not [need to]  
4 explicitly tell the jury that defendant may have gone to Thailand to have sex with  
5 children” because that “was implicit in the mere mention of Thailand” (alterations  
6 omitted)). Musk’s later statements all build on this theme. (*E.g.*, Compl. ¶ 88.)

7 But while the reasonable reader would infer this point from the combined  
8 effect of Musk’s statements, there is no need for inference: Musk makes the point  
9 explicitly. In Musk’s e-mail to the BuzzFeed reporter, Musk wrote:

10 He may claim to know how to cave dive, but he wasn't on the cave dive rescue team and most of the actual dive team  
refused to hang out with him. I wonder why ...

11 <https://www.google.com/search?q=chiang+rai+child+trafficking&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&hl=en-us&client=safari>

12 (*Id.* Ex. K., p. 56.) In other words, Musk asked why was he “suspicious” of  
13 Unsworth? He answers the question with a hyperlink, sharing a Google search of  
14 “Chiang Rai child trafficking.” (*Id.*)<sup>9</sup>

15 Musk made no reference to inside information or first-hand facts as the basis  
16 for his opinion. And the hyperlink posted by Musk signaled to the reader that his  
17 comments were mere opinion. *See, e.g., Nicosia*, 72 F. Supp. 2d at 1103 (reasoning  
18 that the presence of hyperlink meant that the plaintiff “adequately disclosed the facts  
19 underlying her conclusion” and that her statements were therefore opinion).

20 4. *Musk’s over-the-top insults are not statements of fact*

21  
22  
23 <sup>9</sup> Hyperlinks are the “twenty-first century equivalent of the footnote for purposes of  
24 attribution in defamation law, because [they have] become a well-recognized means  
25 for an author [on] the Internet to attribute a source.” *Adelson v. Harris*, 973 F. Supp.  
26 2d 467, 484 (S.D.N.Y. 2013), *aff’d*, 876 F.3d 413 (2d Cir. 2017). “Hyperlinking  
signals that an author has relied on underlying facts, which are themselves subject to  
27 multiple interpretations, and invites the reader to test the reasonableness of the  
author’s interpretation rather than accept it as gospel.” Lyriisa Barnett Lidsky et al.,  
28 *Of Reasonable Readers and Unreasonable Speakers: Libel Law in a Networked  
World*, 23 Va. J. Soc. Pol’y & L. 155, 165 (2016).

Despite the importance of hyperlinks in internet defamation analysis, Unsworth  
omitted it from his quotation of Musk’s e-mail in the body of his Complaint.  
(*Compare* Compl. ¶ 88 with *id.* Ex. K, p. 56.)



1           Insults receive bright-line protection under the First Amendment. Therefore  
2 “vigorous epithets” and “lusty and imaginative expressions of contempt” cannot  
3 form the basis of a defamation claim. *Harrell v. George*, 2012 WL 3647941, at \*7  
4 (E.D. Cal. Aug. 22, 2012) (alterations and citations omitted).

5           The more colorful the invective, the more likely the reader is to understand  
6 that it is opinion. Courts trust that “the outrageous and the outlandish will be  
7 recognized for what they are.” *Dworkin v. Hustler Mag. Inc.*, 867 F.2d 1188, 1194  
8 (9th Cir. 1989); *see also id.* (“Ludicrous statements are much less insidious and  
9 debilitating than falsities that bear the ring of truth.”); *Clifford*, 2018 WL 4997419, at  
10 \*8 (“As the United States Supreme Court has held, a published statement that is  
11 ‘pointed, exaggerated, and heavily laden with emotional rhetoric and moral outrage’  
12 cannot constitute a defamatory statement.” (quoting *Milkovich*, 497 U.S. at 32));  
13 *Ollman v. Evans*, 750 F.2d 970, 983 n.25 (D.C. Cir. 1984) (“‘[T]here are some  
14 statements that are in form statements of opinion, or even of fact, which cannot  
15 reasonably be understood to be meant literally and seriously and are obviously mere  
16 vituperation and abuse.’” (quoting Restatement (Second) Torts § 566)).

17           Internet insults are particularly likely to be construed as opinion. *See SI03*,  
18 *Inc. v. Bodybuilding.com, LLC*, 2008 WL 11348458, at \*10 (D. Idaho May 1, 2008)  
19 (“[I]n the context of Internet postings and the casual dialogue that typically  
20 accompanies such ‘cyber-smackdowns,’ name-calling, hyperbole, and, generally,  
21 juvenile behavior is not unusual; indeed, it is not only expected at times, but often  
22 encouraged.”); *Jacobus*, 51 N.Y.S.3d at 339 (noting that insults “on social media  
23 have been held to warrant an understanding that the statements contained therein are  
24 vigorous expressions of personal opinion, rather than the rigorous and  
25 comprehensive presentation of factual matter” (citation omitted)).

26           Courts therefore routinely find that over-the-top accusations on the internet—  
27 including ones of ostensible fact—are merely insulting opinion. *See, e.g., Chaker*,  
28 209 Cal. App. 4th at 1149 (internet accusation that plaintiff “picks up street walkers

1 and homeless drug addicts and is a dead beat dad” would be “interpreted by the  
2 average Internet reader as [nothing] more than . . . insulting name calling,” mere  
3 “embellishments” meant to convey that the plaintiff is “a dishonest and scary  
4 person”); *Wallace v. Geckosystems Int’l Corp.*, 2013 WL 4054147, at \*7-8 (Del.  
5 Super. Ct. July 31, 2013) (internet accusation that plaintiff committed acts of incest  
6 merely “amount to a scathing personal attack”); *Finkel v. Dauber*, 906 N.Y.S.2d 697  
7 (Sup. Ct. 2010) (internet accusation that plaintiff, among other things, had “sex with  
8 a horse” and “contracted AIDS from a male prostitute” could “only be read as puerile  
9 attempts by adolescents to outdo each other”).

10 Musk’s statements fall comfortably within this rule. They utilize the same sort  
11 of “imaginative” and “non-literal” insults that courts deem opinion. *Knieval*, 393  
12 F.3d at 1074. The reasonable reader would understand that Musk’s over-the-top  
13 assertions—for example, that Unsworth was a “pedo guy” and had “a 12-year old  
14 child bride” (Compl. ¶ 116)—were “obviously . . . intended as a means of ridiculing”  
15 Unsworth. *Krinsky*, 159 Cal. App. 4th at 1177.

16 5. *Musk’s colloquial statements are not reasonably interpreted as*  
17 *statements of facts*

18 Statements that lack the “formality and polish typically found in documents []  
19 which a reader would expect to find facts” are treated instead as opinion.  
20 *ComputerXpress, Inc. v. Jackson*, 93 Cal. App. 4th 993, 1012 (2001) (citation  
21 omitted). To make this determination, courts scrutinize semantics. The less polish a  
22 statement has, the less likely it is to be factual. *See Summit Bank*, 206 Cal. App. 4th  
23 at 699 (finding that a defendant’s failure to “use proper spelling or grammar” showed  
24 that his statement was intended to be a “free-flowing diatribe” and not a statement of  
25 fact); *Global Telemedia*, 132 F. Supp. 2d at 1267 (finding that statements were ones  
26 of opinion because they were full of “short-hand phrases and language not generally  
27 found in fact-based documents, such as corporate press releases or SEC filings”);  
28 *Rocker Mgmt. LLC v. John Does*, 2003 WL 22149380, at \*3 (N.D. Cal. May 29,

1 2003) (explaining that because a defendant did “not use proper spelling, grammar or  
2 capitalization,” that would “suggest to the reader that his messages are statements of  
3 opinion rather than fact”).

4 Musk’s statements were “written with a great deal of linguistic informality.”  
5 *Global Telemedia*, 132 F. Supp. 2d at 1269.

- 6 • Musk frequently employed colloquialisms. (*See, e.g.*, Compl. ¶ 76  
7 (stating the submarine would work “no problemo”); *id.* ¶ 92 (stating that  
8 it’s “total bs” that the submarine wouldn’t work); *id.* ¶ 75 (referring to  
9 Unsworth as “this dude”).)
- 10 • Musk used shorthand. (*Id.* ¶¶ 73-74 (stating that Unsworth is “sus,” “an  
11 abbreviated form of ‘suspicious’”); *id.* ¶¶ 76-77 (referring to Unsworth  
12 as “pedo guy,” a “shorthand phrase for the term pedophile”); *id.* ¶ 79  
13 (“Bet ya a signed dollar it’s true.”).)
- 14 • Musk used curse words. (*Id.* ¶ 88 (calling the BuzzFeed reporter a  
15 “fucking asshole”); *id.* (“I fucking hope he sues me.”).)
- 16 • Musk’s statements have typos. (*Id.* ¶ 76 (“We will make one of the  
17 mini-sub/pod going [sic] all the way to Cave 5.”).)
- 18 • Musk wrote in fragments. (*Id.* ¶ 92 (“Never saw Unsworth at any  
19 point.”); *id.* (“Was told he was banned from the site.”).)

20 This informal style “alert[s] a reasonable reader to the fact that these  
21 observations are probably not written by someone with authority or firm factual  
22 foundations for his beliefs.” *Global Telemedia*, 132 F. Supp. 2d at 1269.

23 Compare this to Musk’s measured approach when apologizing for his  
24 statements. There, Musk writes in complete sentences and with a restrained and  
25 professional tone. (Compl. ¶ 80 (“[H]is actions against me do not justify my actions  
26 against him, and for that I apologize to Mr. Unsworth and to the companies I  
27 represent as leader. The fault is mine and mine alone.”). The reasonable reader  
28 would know which statement to take seriously and which to discount.

1           6.     *Musk’s expressions of uncertainty show that his statements did*  
 2                 *not have a concrete factual foundation and were therefore*  
 3                 *opinion*

4           Unless a speaker is “claiming to be in possession of objectively verifiable  
 5 facts,” his statement is necessarily just “an interpretation, a theory, conjecture, or  
 6 surmise” and “is not actionable.” *Yagman*, 55 F.3d at 1441.

7           Not only did Musk never claim to be in possession of such facts, but he was  
 8 open that he did not and could not have such facts in his possession:

- 9           • Musk stated that he did not meet Unsworth when they were in Thailand.  
 10           (Compl. ¶ 73 (“Never saw [Unsworth] . . . at any point when we were in  
 11           the caves.”); *id.* ¶ 92 (“Never saw Unsworth at any point.”).) From then  
 12           on, Musk and Unsworth were separated by 8,000 miles and an ocean.
- 13           • Musk demonstrated a lack of familiarity with Unsworth, referring to  
 14           him with generic placeholders. (*Id.* ¶ 73 (referring to Unsworth as the  
 15           “British expat guy who lives in Thailand”); *id.* ¶ 75 (referring to  
 16           Unsworth as “this dude”).)
- 17           • Musk made clear on numerous occasions that his suspicions were just  
 18           unverified theories. His statements are flatly inconsistent with the  
 19           notion that he possessed first-hand information about Unsworth. (*Id.*  
 20           ¶ 79 (“Bet ya a signed dollar it’s true.”); *id.* ¶ 83 (“You don’t think it’s  
 21           strange he hasn’t sued me?”); *id.* ¶ 88 (“[M]ost of the actual dive team  
 22           refused to hang out with him. I wonder why . . .”).)
- 23           • Musk publicly disavowed his Twitters statements. He deleted the  
 24           offending tweets, “apologize[d] to Mr. Unsworth,” and admitted he  
 25           overreacted. (*Id.* ¶ 80.)
- 26           • Musk’s BuzzFeed comments over e-mails were expressly not meant to  
 27           be relied on as fact, as Musk designated his diatribe “off the record.”  
 28           (*Id.* Ex. K., p. 55.)

1 This context shows that Musk’s statements would not have been interpreted as  
2 statements of literal fact. *See Tipping*, 2016 WL 397088, at \*5 (granting defendant’s  
3 motion to dismiss where there were “no allegations that [the defendant] had any  
4 knowledge about Plaintiff before encountering her for the first time at the [event  
5 where he allegedly defamed her], much less any knowledge concerning her personal  
6 life or the quality of her [professional] work”).

7 At most, Musk told others to investigate for themselves. (Compl. ¶ 88 (“I  
8 suggest that you call people you know in Thailand, find out what’s actually going.”);  
9 *id.* Ex. J, p. 47 (““Did you investigate at all?” [Musk] said in a follow-up tweet to [a  
10 Twitter user]. ‘I’m guessing answer is no. Why?’”).) Such suggestions—even if  
11 unreasonable—are not defamatory. *See Brian v. Richardson*, 87 N.Y.2d 46, 53  
12 (1995) (explaining that when “the purpose of defendant’s article was to advocate an  
13 independent governmental investigation,” the “reasonable reader would understand  
14 the statements defendant made about plaintiff as mere *allegations* to be investigated  
15 rather than as *facts*”).

16 7. *Readers did not interpret Musk’s statements as factual assertions*

17 Good evidence of how a “reasonable reader” would view Musk’s statements is  
18 how readers actually did. Those who read and commented on Musk’s comments  
19 uniformly treated them as opinion. The reasonable reader interprets an internet post  
20 alongside its comments. *Global Telemedia*, 132 F. Supp. 2d at 1268 (explaining that  
21 the “reasonable reader” would interpret the statement in question by “looking at the  
22 hundreds and thousands of postings about the company from a wide variety of  
23 posters”); *Feld v. Conway*, 16 F. Supp. 3d 1, 4 (D. Mass. 2014) (“The tweet cannot  
24 be read in isolation, but in the context of the entire discussion.”); *see also Knievel*,  
25 393 F.3d at 1076 (“Just as a reader must absorb a printed statement in the context of  
26 the media in which it appears, a computer user necessarily views web pages in the  
27 context of the links through which the user accessed those pages.”).

28 Therefore when a statement is published alongside commentary doubting its

1 veracity, that statement is more likely to be viewed as opinion. *See Cahill*, 884 A.2d  
2 at 467 (finding that a statement was opinion in part because “a[t] least one reader of  
3 the blog quickly reached the conclusion that Doe’s comments were no more than  
4 unfounded and unconvincing opinion”); *Redmond v. Gawker Media, LLC*, 2012 WL  
5 3243507, at \*6 (Cal. Ct. App. Aug. 10, 2012) (noting that a statement was treated as  
6 opinion by readers “[a]s shown by the comments posted” below the article). Even  
7 limited to the cherry-picked information included in Unsworth’s Complaint, it’s clear  
8 that **none** of Musk’s statements were treated as fact by those who encountered them:

- 9 • Twitter user @yoda wrote to Musk: “one other thing, elon. your  
10 dedication to facts and truth would have been wonderful if applied to  
11 that time when you called someone a pedo.” (Compl. Ex. I, p. 42.)  
12 @yoda also communicated his incredulity when he tweeted: “what i  
13 think is especially strange here is that you’re wondering why  
14 [Unsworth] hasn’t sued you while the rest of us are wondering why you  
15 did something so egregious that he could sue you for in the first place.”  
16 (*Id.* Ex. J, p. 47.)
- 17 • As pleaded by Unsworth, the public criticized Musk for making an  
18 “accusation of pedophilia against Mr. Unsworth without any evidence.”  
19 (*Id.* ¶ 80.)
- 20 • BuzzFeed news titled its article about Musk’s tweets: “Elon Musk Has  
21 Revisited His *Baseless* Pedophile Claims.” (*Id.* Ex. J, p. 44 (emphasis  
22 added).) The article further characterized Musk’s tweets as  
23 “groundless.” (*Id.*) It also notes that the public generally understood  
24 Musk’s statements to be unfounded insults, since Musk “fac[ed]  
25 widespread condemnation” after the tweets. (*Id.*)
- 26 • User comments on the BuzzFeed article were uniformly critical of  
27 Musk. But none appear to have interpreted Musk’s comments as  
28 statements of fact. (*Id.* at p. 49 (“Social media is destroying society!”);

1 *id.* (describing comments as “mind-bendingly stupid”); *id.* (noting that  
2 this isn’t the first time an executive had made “idiotic comments”).)

- 3 • BuzzFeed described Musk’s e-mail as lodging “evidenceless criticism of  
4 the rescuer.” (*Id.* Ex. K, p. 55.)

5 Determining the views of the reasonable reader is simplified when *actual*  
6 readers react. *Cahill*, 884 A.2d at 467; *Redmond*, 2012 WL 3243507, at \*6. While  
7 readers were disappointed in Musk or offended by him, none took his statements as  
8 true. “Context does resolve the matter.” *Koch*, 817 F.2d at 509. Musk’s  
9 statements—when examined in context—were non-actionable opinion.

10 **C. Musk’s Statements are Not Sufficiently Factual to be Susceptible of**  
11 **Being Proved True or False**

12 Even if context here is not dispositive on its own, Musk’s statements constitute  
13 nonactionable opinion because they are not “sufficiently factual to be susceptible of  
14 being proved true or false.” *Underwager*, 69 F.3d at 366. The determination of  
15 whether a statement can be “proved true or false” must account for the context in  
16 which the statement is made; “the fact that [a] literal interpretation could be proven  
17 true or false is immaterial.” *Knievel*, 393 F.3d at 1078. Here, an assessment of  
18 Musk’s statements in context reveals that they are not sufficiently factual to be  
19 susceptible of being proved true or false.

20 *First*, Musk’s conclusions about Unsworth were “inherently subjective”  
21 because they were based on his personal judgment and assessment of the fact that  
22 Unsworth was a British expat who lived in Thailand. *Partington*, 56 F.3d at 1157-58  
23 (“assessments . . . [that] are inherently subjective . . . [are] not susceptible of being  
24 proved true or false”); *Dreamstone Ent. v. Maysalward Inc.*, 2014 WL 4181026, at  
25 \*8 (C.D. Cal. Aug. 18, 2014) (opinion of party’s “subjective state of mind [] is less  
26 susceptible to being proven true or false”); *Mattel, Inc. v. MCA Recs.*, 28 F. Supp. 2d  
27 1120, 1161 (C.D. Cal. 1998) (speaker’s “judgment” is not “susceptible to an  
28 objective determination of truth or falsehood”).

1 In fact, a district court in this circuit considering similar subject matter rejected  
2 a defamation claim on these grounds. The court held that when the defendant stated  
3 she thought the plaintiff corporation was “a front for pedophilia,” that statement was  
4 “not susceptible to empirical testing” because the proof of truth or falsity required an  
5 assessment of what the facts looked like *to the defendant*. *Higher Balance, LLC v.*  
6 *Quantum Future Group*, 2008 WL 5281487, at \*9-10 (D. Or. Dec. 18, 2008). The  
7 same is true here. *See Price v. Viking Penguin, Inc.*, 881 F.2d 1426, 1443 (8th Cir.  
8 1989) (explaining that what constitutes “‘suspicious’ is a matter of opinion”).

9 *Second*, Musk’s claims that Unsworth is “sus” or a “pedo guy” are, at most,  
10 conclusions that are “too loose and hyperbolic” to be proved true or false. *Art of*  
11 *Living Found. v. Does*, 2011 WL 2441898, at \*8 (N.D. Cal. June 15, 2011) (finding  
12 defendant’s conclusion that plaintiff must be a “front-end name for a group of  
13 fraudulent NGOs” that are committing “large-scale organized fraud according to the  
14 laws of several countries” cannot be proven true or false).

15 The “lack of precision” in terms like “sus” and “pedo guy” make them  
16 “incapable of being proven true or false.” *McCabe v. Rattiner*, 814 F.2d 839, 841-42  
17 (1st Cir. 1987) (finding “scam” to be insufficiently precise); *Buckley v. Littell*, 539  
18 F.2d 882, 893 (2d Cir. 1976) (“[T]he use of ‘fascist,’ ‘fellow traveler’ and ‘radical  
19 right’ as political labels in *Wild Tongues* cannot be regarded as having been proved  
20 to be statements of fact.”). And the Ninth Circuit holds that informal terms such as  
21 “pimp”—much like “sus” and “pedo guy”—cannot be proven true or false because  
22 they are nothing more than “sophomoric slang.” *Knievel*, 393 F.3d at 1078. This is  
23 especially true when made, as here, in the context of a website like Twitter that is rife  
24 with sophomoric commentary (*Knievel*, 393 F.3d at 1078 (reading “pimp” in context  
25 of the “satirical, risqué, and sophomoric slang found on the rest of the site”)) and as  
26 part of a “stream of [] rhetoric” (*Lieberman v. Fieger*, 338 F.3d 1076, 1080 (9th Cir.  
27 2003)).

28 Musk’s later comments that Unsworth alleges are defamatory (Compl. ¶¶ 80,



1 83, 88) are nothing more than a continuation of the same ongoing stream of rhetoric  
2 that began with his “sus” and “pedo guy” comments, and therefore are similarly not  
3 susceptible to an objective determination of truth or falsehood. In *Mattel*, the court  
4 found that the claims of a “crime,” “heist,” and “theft” could not be proven true or  
5 false because they were made at a time “where the audience would anticipate efforts  
6 by the parties to persuade others to their positions by use of epit[hets], fiery rhetoric,  
7 or hyperbole.” 28 F. Supp. 2d at 1161 (citations omitted). Here, Musk’s later  
8 comments were all published with reference to his earlier comments that had created  
9 an ongoing public debate (Compl. ¶¶ 79-80, 83)—a public debate engaged in and  
10 stoked by Unsworth and his team. (*See id.* ¶¶ 82-87.) The fiery context in which  
11 Musk’s later comments were made therefore make them insusceptible to an objective  
12 determination of truth or falsehood. *See Stolatis v. Hernandez*, 77 N.Y.S.3d 473  
13 (2018) (“[V]iewing the entire series of posts as a whole, as we must, we conclude  
14 that the posts constituted an expression of protected opinion.”).

15 *Finally*, Unsworth also alleges that Musk’s statement that Unsworth made an  
16 “utterly false” claim about Musk is defamatory because it “false[ly] accuses Mr.  
17 Unsworth of being a liar.” (Compl. ¶¶ 92-93.) But “lying” is not by itself  
18 defamatory because it applies to a “spectrum of untruths including ‘white lies,’  
19 ‘partial truths,’ ‘misinterpretation,’ and ‘deception.’” *Underwager*, 69 F.3d at 367.  
20 Where “plaintiff fail[s] to show that the challenged statement implied a verifiable  
21 assertion of perjury, [] the statement [is] protected under the First Amendment.”  
22 *Gardner*, 563 F.3d at 987; *Clifford*, 2018 WL 4997419, at \*7-8 (rejecting plaintiff’s  
23 claim that defendant’s assertions that she had lied was defamatory). Here, the  
24 Complaint does not allege that Musk’s accusation that Unsworth’s claim was “utterly  
25 false” is a “verifiable assertion of perjury” (Compl. ¶¶ 92, 125-26) and thus  
26 Unsworth cannot show that Musk’s “utterly false” comment is actionable.

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1 Dated: December 26, 2018

HUESTON HENNIGAN LLP

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By: /s/ John C. Hueston

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